

LOVING WORDS

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PIYA TAN edited by RATNA LIM

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Simple Joys 3

***Loving
Words***

by

PIYA TAN

Edited by

RATNA LIM EI GEIK

THE MINDING CENTRE

Singapore

The Simple Joys series

SJ1	2009	<i>Simple Joys</i>	R1-97
SJ2	2011a	<i>Simple Joys 2: Healing Words</i>	R98-190
RB	2011b	<i>Revisoning Buddhism</i>	RB1-33
SJ3	2013	<i>Simple Joys 3: Loving Words</i>	R182-240 with RB

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ISBN 978-981-07-7317-5 (E-book)

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Tan, Piya, 1949-

Simple joys 3 : loving words / by Piya Tan ;
edited by Ratna LIM Ei Geik. – Singapore : The Minding
Centre, [2013]

pages cm

ISBN : 978-981-07-7316-8 (paperback)

1. Religious life – Buddhism. 2. Conduct of life.
I. Title. II. Lim, Ratna Ei Geik.

BQ4012

294.3444 -- dc23

OCN855509170

The Minding Centre, based in Singapore, is part of Piya Tan’s Dharma ministry. It was founded in 2006 to provide Dharma-based non-religious service to those in need of counsel and solace. It also serves as a haven and hub for those seeking Dharma by way of meditation and education, Sutta study and translation, and spiritual experience. The Centre also supports and promotes Piya Tan in his full-time Buddhist and related work.

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The Sutta Discovery Series is part of the Living Word of the Buddha project which aspires to encourage and facilitate Buddhist Studies, both in a Dharma-inspired and academic manner for personal development as well as outreach work on a local and global scale. The Minding Centre and the Living Word of the Buddha project are motivated and guided by the vision of mere Buddhism.

<http://dharmafarer.org>
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The mere Buddhist vision. We aspire to learn, teach and practise mere Dharma, or “non-religious Buddhism,” that is, Buddhism as simple as possible, as the Buddha Dharma, so that it is open to all who seek true stillness and liberating wisdom. We aspire to compassionately and joyfully proclaim the possibility, necessity and urgency of gaining spiritual liberation in this life itself—at least as a streamwinner, with or without dhyana—in keeping with the Okkanti Saṃyutta (S 25). ***Mere Buddhism is easy: live it and be free***

CONVENTIONS

The following conventions are used in this book:

SD n.x *Sutta Discovery* by Piya Tan, where n denotes volume number and x is the chapter number.
See online: <http://dharmafarer.org>

Basic abbreviations

D	Dīgha,nikāya	Long Discourses
M	Majjhima,nikāya	Middle Length Discourses
S	Samyutta,nikāya	Connected Discourses
A	Āṅg'uttara,nikāya	Numerical Discourse

General abbreviations

J	Jātaka
J or JA	Jātaka Commentary
Kh	Khuddaka,pāṭha
Dh	Dhammapada
DhA	Dhammapada Commentary
U	Udāna
It	Iti,vuttaka
Sn	Sutta,nipāta
Tha	Thera,gāthā
ThaA	Thera,gāthā Commentary
Thi	Therī,gāthā
ThīA	Therī,gāthā Commentary
Vism	Visuddhi,magga

FOREWORD

Loving Words celebrates the love and wisdom that pervade the whole of the Buddha's teaching. It is the third volume in the popular "Simple Joys" series, containing 55 reflections (R182-240).¹ These weekly reflections, first written in January 2007, and now total over 300. They have been inspired by the joys and sorrows of those I am in touch with, some of whom I only know through the Internet. Our lives are the fire and clay from which we forge healing vessels of joy and wisdom.

The reflections are mostly written in poetic prose, using simple words as far as possible, to invoke and express simple joys, of which we are all capable, but often need to be reminded of. The source of such joy and wisdom is of course the Buddha's teaching.

Not all these reflections are easy on us, as they sometimes touch on the raw and open wounds of our past, often forgotten but still hurting. If we are not ready for such reflections, then simply set them aside for the moment. Go on to enjoy the ones that help us rejoice in our goodness. When we are healed or stronger, we would then smile at those more difficult reflections.

When I write such reflections, I often do so vicariously: I put myself in your shoes. I try to feel your joys and pains, and then put them into words that all can enjoy if they allow themselves to. It is not surprising then that many have intimated to me that these reflections were written synchronously (as if you knew my feelings, my troubles).

We all experience lack and loss: the first noble truth is common to all. We must choose to learn from suffering. Otherwise, it would overwhelm us. Suffering is like a huge rock blocking our path. We

¹ Five reflections in this series have been published in *Simple Joys 2: Healing Words*, and as such are not included here. See the Contents.

Foreword

can either work around it, or knock it into gravel for a stronger path. Suffering simply means we are not there yet; the journey is still progressing. Understanding our problems gives meaning to our lives; learning from our problems, gives purpose to us.

In other words, the “Simple Joys” series is an on-going “book of life.” It is to be read and reflected on whenever we feel like it. We could, as many have told me, read a reflection before going to work, or as a prelude to sitting meditation, or to keep ourselves happy.

Some of the reflections also challenge us to think or re-think what we have taken for granted of Buddhism, or ourselves, even of life itself. The final challenge is for us to drop our weapons of strife – our views – and to simply accept things as they are, just for the moment. This moment is that of the living breath, of true life. If we can be at peace with this breath of peace and beauty, then we are preparing ourselves for the liberating truth.

We exist by what we do; our quality of life on how we think. To truly live we must feed on joy. Compassion is being kind to others before we need to, even before they need it. Wisdom means reflecting on truth and beauty before we need to, knowing what to do or not when the time comes. Let us share these reflections with others before we need to—while the Buddha’s true teaching is still with us.

Āsāḷha Puja Day
22 July 2013

Acknowledgements

For the elegant cover, we thank Veron Lien.

For proof-reading, we thank Elsie Lian.

For making this volume possible, we thank you.

THE 3 PHASES OF MY BUDDHIST GROWTH

The first phase (1970-1980): Learning

Thailand. The first phase of my Buddhist life was basically that of learning whatever of Buddhism from whomever I could. This was really a fun youth period of my Buddhist life as a Thai Theravada monk, learning not only the Dharma-Vinaya and Pali, but also the Thai language and culture. I learned how Buddhism can make a whole nation charitable and happy despite all our weaknesses, and lived with the full tradition and strength of the monastic life.

Malaysia & Singapore. When I returned to work in Malaysia and Singapore, the local Buddhists welcomed and worked with me most enthusiastically. Although there were national Buddhist youth camps before, this was the first time when participants studied the suttas (not just listening to talks) in relation to daily life and Dharma-hearted fellowship.

Integrated Syllabus. This period was highlighted by the Integrated Syllabus of Buddhist studies with its teachers' guides. It comprised of graduated lessons for weekly Sunday Dharma classes of 5 levels lasting the same number of years. This was the syllabus that helped to successfully launch the Buddhist Studies project for secondary schools in Singapore in the 1980s, when the Integrated Syllabus served as the basis for its popular textbooks.

The second phase (1980-2000): Teaching

National courses. This was a challenging "middle-age" period when I realized that local Buddhists were all divided up into ethnic camps: Chinese, Thai, Burmese, Sinhalese, Tibetan and Japanese. Although Buddhists seems to rise above such labels, the fellowship was often superficial, as we placed the ethnic before the Dharma.

The 3 Phases of my Buddhist Growth

Local fellowship. Sadly I also felt that most ethnic temples and centres were more concerned with fund-raising and rituals, and treating the monks as priests. The more I tried to fit in, the more I felt rejected, because I was not Chinese-speaking, nor Thai, nor Burmese, nor Sinhalese, nor Tibetan, nor Japanese.

At first, I thought that we needed some kind of national Buddhist identity. However, after noticing how such nationalism could become political or parochial, I felt that it was better to think in terms of a “common fellowship” of locals (those living together in the same country or area) centered around the Dharma, rather than ethnicity.²

Growing the Bodhi. This was also a period when I tried to learn from western Buddhists, especially those working as full-time and self-supporting lay workers. This worked for a while, but some of the local Buddhist leaders thought that I was westernizing “their” Buddhism. The younger Buddhists were nevertheless enthusiastic with this more liberating approach to the Dharma. The seeds have been sown, and it remains to see how they sprout into a strong and shady Bodhi tree in our own home.

The third phase (2000-present): Seeking

Full-time lay ministry. After some 20 years as a monk, I decided to work as a lay worker again, so that I would not be stepping on any temple toes or be in the way of any Buddhist leader. I was still propelled by the love of the suttas and a vision of the Dharma.

Sutta translation. When we (my family and I) were invited to move to Singapore in 2001, I was already 51. The local enthusiasm for the suttas reinvigorated my efforts to delve into them again. I don't

² This does not mean we should not celebrate our own ethnic festivals or respect our ancient traditions, but we should not let them divide us from others who are different.

even need my personal library of scriptures and books which I had to leave behind in Malaysia. It is now the digital age and almost everything I need for my full-time translation work (beginning in 2002) is available digitally.

Sutta study. In Singapore, I am pleasantly surprised that there are a growing number of people who simply love the suttas once they see that the suttas are simple yet inspiring.

Some do their own self-study by following further readings through the Introductions and footnotes, and referring to the related texts online (<http://dharmafarer.org>).

Proof-reading. Others find it simply a life-changing, life-affirming or truly joyful experience just to help proof-read the sutta translations. (If you wish to be part of the “Proof of the Sutta” network, email us at dharmafarer@gmail.com.)

Meditation. At the Minding Centre (TMC), we have weekly free guided meditation before the Sutta Study which is also recorded for the Internet (YouTube). Our open Beginner’s Meditation Course (for Buddhists and non-Buddhists, local and overseas) is conducted every month. For details, see <http://themindingcentre.org>.

Weekly reflections. The reflections are my weekly testimony to the truth, beauty, and healing power of the Dharma. So powerful and joyful is the Dharma that I cannot but joyfully write at least one reflection for every week since 2007. We now have over 300 reflections all available online. If you wish to receive these weekly reflections, and be a part of this Dharma Inspiration Network, simply email us at dharmafarer@gmail.com.

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FOR MAKING THIS POSSIBLE, THANKS!

Since the 1970s we have called ourselves **the Dharmafarers**, a community of lay Buddhist workers. The Dharmafarer work is possible and meaningful because there are those who want to know and practise the Buddha's teaching, to experience heartfelt peace and liberating wisdom. Sadhu to your love for the Dharma and making it available to others through [the Dharmafarer website](#).

The Minding Centre (TMC) was set up in Singapore in 2006³ for that purpose, that is, as a right livelihood for Piya and Ratna to full-time Dharma work. TMC is an act of faith, a witness to the living truth of the Buddha Dharma, a still centre in the eye of the world's storms. Sadhu for making the Dharma available to the world.

Piya's full time **sutta translation work** now totals 46 volumes (over 9000 A4 pages), with introductions and notes, suitable for self-study or even meditation reflections. These translations are helpful for a better understanding of early Buddhist meditation and psychology for self-therapy. They are also valuable social commentaries for our own times. These translations and other works by Piya are freely available online at <http://dharmafarer.org>. Sadhu to your interest in looking deeper into your own hearts for joy and wisdom.

All these Dharma-moved actions have only one purpose: to live joyfully, reflecting on impermanence, in aspiration for streamwinning in this life itself. We declare our faith in this, and invite you to read **Saṃyutta Nikāya ch 25** (Okkanti Saṃyutta) and respond to the Buddha's effort to awaken us to a meaningfully happy life here and now.

*We are not religious experts; we are learning to breathe in peace.
We know little about computers, but enough for Dharma work.
With what little we have, the Dharma multiplies it as we share it.*

³ The Dharmafarer work in Singapore, however, started in 2001.

1 Qingming (“Clear and Bright”) [R182]

Many Chinese annually celebrate the *Qīngmíngjié* 清明节 (“clear and bright” day) to honour their dead, traditionally by cleaning their ancestors’ (the closest relatives’) graves and making offerings there. It falls on the fifteenth day from the spring equinox (when the sun is right over the equator), and locally, this, unlike other Chinese feast-days which are lunar, always falls on 5th April. Busy modern Chinese would, however, usually observe it on the nearest week-end or convenient day.

What is the story behind the event, and how do Buddhists (or anyone) celebrate it in a meaningful way today? There are at least two traditional stories connected with the festival. The oldest story goes back to the Spring and Autumn Period, when it was declared a 3-day memorial *Hánshí jié* (寒食节, “cold-food day”) in honour of **Jie Zitui** (介子推 *jièzǐ tuī*), a loyal servant of **Duke Wen of Jin** (晉文公 *Jìn Wéngōng*, 697-628 BCE).

The story behind Hanshi day began on one hot summer afternoon during the exile of **Chóng’ěr** 重耳 (Duke Wen’s previous name). The prince was exhausted and hungry. His advisor and personal friend, Jie Zitui, made some meat soup for him despite the difficulty of finding any meat. Chong’er enjoyed the soup but wondered where the meat came from. Jie had cut a piece of flesh from his own thigh to make the soup! Deeply moved, Chong’er promised to reward him one day.

When Chong’er became Duke, he forgot about Jie, who had quietly retired into the mountains. As soon as Duke Wen recalled Jie, he went in search of him. Resorting to an expedience, he ordered that three sides of his mountain be set ablaze, hoping that Jie would emerge through the opening. Tragically, Jie and his mother died in the flames. The devastated Duke declared three days of mourning

1 Qingming (“clear and bright”) [R182]

for them, that is, Qingming day and the days before and after it, when no fire should be lighted. Since no cooking could be done without fire, it is called “cold-food” day.

Over a thousand years later, the Tang emperor **Xuanzong** (唐玄宗 *Táng Xuánzōng*), noticed that too many of his subjects were making expensive and extravagant ceremonies and offerings in honour of their ancestors. To curb such extravagance, the emperor declared in 732 CE that such rituals should only be performed at the ancestors’ graves on Qingming day. In 1949, however, the Communist Party of China banned the feast-day, but it continues to be observed in Hong Kong, Macau and amongst the overseas Chinese. The festival, however, was reinstated in China in 2008.

The Qingming festival, as such, is significant in two ways for us today. Firstly, it is a solemn reminder for us to remember the goodness of others, especially those who have supported and served us in our times of need. Jie Zitui’s soup made from his own flesh symbolizes the sacrifices of those who have given us life and health, that is, especially our parents. These are the people we should support and show our love while they still are living. Funeral rituals, even elaborate ones, do not benefit the dead, especially when we have neither loved nor cared for them while they lived. Such elaborate rituals could be more of a guilt trip, or worse, merely as a self-serving defensive front to falsely impress society for the sake of wealth and status.

We should love and care for them while they live, no matter how difficult this may be. For once, they pass on, they are reborn into new lives. Our turn will come, and surely we would be treated as we have treated our own elders. So we need to break the vicious cycle of superstition and negative values right now, so that the snake stops biting its own tail, and is free to evolve.

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The Buddha teaches that there are really no dead people. All beings are reborn. We can only honour their wholesome memories. We cultivate lovingkindness by recalling the good people they are and the kindness they have shown. When our minds are joyfully stilled (even momentarily) with unconditional love, then we direct that energy towards the deceased.⁴ This can be done not just for parents or relatives, but also for anyone (such as friends) whom we care for, and even for animals (such as our pets).⁵

Qingming-jie is sometimes called “grave-cleaning day” because family members would once a year to clear up the grave area and then make offerings and prayers there. In such societies, like Singapore, where land is scarce and expensive, and the dead are more commonly cremated, graves are becoming non-existent. In some cases, our ancestors’ graves could be very far away (even in another country). Grave-cleaning, however, can be a great bonding act for the family if it is possible and done in a wholesome way.

The point is that our respect and love for the dead should not merely be ritualized, and never be guilt-ridden. Our respect and love for the departed should be spontaneous and meaningful: it should be done with the right mind and full heart, that is, with lovingkindness. This can be done from anywhere, when we, either alone or with others, recall the goodness of the deceased, and dedicate to them the good karma that we ourselves have done.

According to Buddhist teachings, this is how it happens. Imagine I tell you here that I have written this reflection with specially you in mind, or that a loved one tells you he has given some time and resources to help some earthquake or tsunami victims in your name. Surely you would feel warmed up with a wholesome mind.

⁴ See **Tiro,kuḍḍa Sutta** (Khp 7/6 = Pv 1.5/4 f), SD 2.7.

⁵ On how our pets benefit, see Piya Tan, *Simple Joys*, 2009, p 225-227, “Animals go to heaven.”

1 Qingming (“clear and bright”) [R182]

The departed, if they are still lingering nearby for some reason, would at once connect with our positive mental energies, and be free of their insecure attachments, and fare on happily.

Otherwise, our dearly departed would have been reborn elsewhere as a deva or another human, or some other being. All such forms do not need our offerings and prayers, and cannot benefit from them. Only our lovingkindness, the power of love, can touch and change their lives.

Rituals, on other hand, can be an excuse for not really loving the deceased. If we truly love the departed, we do not need the professional priests (we do not know what they are doing, anyway) and paying them guilt money. We can and should dedicate our loving-kindness to those whom we love by our own actions.

Performing rituals blindly is simply perpetuating superstition. It is like sitting in a leaking boat and rowing on dry land!⁶ The best way to honour our ancestors is to live now in goodness and benefitting others at the same time. After all, we too are ancestors to our future generations.

2 The four refuges [R183]

One of the most significant problems concerning Buddhism today, ironically, is that we know too much about it, but we have actually no true experience of it at all. It is very easy to collect information about Buddhism from the many teachers who give talks, the books on Buddhism, Buddhist software, and the Internet. Knowledge gives us an idea about something, say, we know about cooking and food, but it is the proper practice and realization of Buddhism that really

⁶ In **Tapo,kamma Sutta** (S 4.1), the Buddha says that self-mortification is like the rudder and oars of a boat stranded on dry land (S 4.1), SD 79.8.

matters, that is, we have to consume the food and enjoy good health.

We often hear of the three trainings in moral virtue, meditation and insight wisdom, and also the three stages of study, practice and realization. Another important set of guidelines for a Dharma practitioner, not often heard of, is known as the “four refuges” (*paṭisa-
raṇa*) or “four reliances” (*nissaya*). The four refuges are listed in the Buddhist texts as follows:

Rely on the teaching,	not the teacher.
Rely on the meaning,	not the letter.
Rely on the explicit meaning,	not the implicit meaning.
Rely on insight,	not on sense-consciousness. ⁷

Rely on the teaching, not the teacher

Consciously or unconsciously, we tend to look for someone, especially a famous, successful or charismatic teacher, to endorse our views. Or, when we claim that a teacher is “good” or even “awakened,” we mean that they agree with our mindset. It is as if everyone wants to be a teacher, but no one wants to learn. The point is that we do not learn from a teacher; we learn from a teaching.

Some of us tend to be drawn to a teacher on account of his looks (religious uniform, skin colour, or attractiveness), or voice (language, nice voice, sweet talk, or jokes). Such people are “overcome by desire and passion” and do not really know the teacher.⁸

Whenever we listen to a Dharma teacher, we should ask ourselves. “What do I learn from all this?” “How can I better myself from what I have heard?”

⁷ See <http://santifm1.0.googlepages.com/fourreliancesutra>.

⁸ Tha 469-472 = A 2:71. See **The teacher or the teaching?** SD 3.14.

2 The four refuges [R183]

Rely on the meaning, not the letter

To listen only to the teacher's "words" means only wanting to hear "new things," but not wanting to change our lives for the better. It is like reading today's newspapers. Having read them we discard them. We should not treat the teacher's words or the Dharma like old newspapers.

The Dharma comprises living words of truth. We may keep hearing the same words or teachings over time. We may even think we understand them, but as we mature, we see new dimensions of the same teaching, and link them together into a more meaningful wholesome vision -- if we keep an open mind.

The word "meaning" also means "purpose." Our purpose in learning or listening to the Dharma should be to better ourselves, that is, to work towards the goal of streamwinning, that is, overcoming self-view, superstition and spiritual doubt.

At the mention of "streamwinning," some people might at once think, "How can I ever attain that goal?" and think of all the negative things about themselves. Or worse, they think they do not need to better themselves, and continue to hurt and mislead others with their pride and knowledge.

Rely on the explicit meaning, not the implicit meaning

The Suttas, which record the teachings of the Buddha and the saints, speak on two levels: the indirect teachings (using images and stories) and the direct teachings (such as about impermanence, suffering and not-self). The former tries to make the latter more interesting and clear. We might say that the indirect teachings are like packaging, but the real product is the direct teachings.

The indirect teaching is to make us feel happy and positive, so that our minds are ready for the direct teachings. The direct teachings, especially those of impermanence, direct us towards a deeper un-

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derstanding of our minds and habits. We are reminded to be true to ourselves and not be blinded by knowledge or drowned in words, no matter how clever.

Rely on insight, not on sense-consciousness

Our knowledge is not always reliable because they are sense-based. We know through seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, especially the first two. We are often mistaken by what we know. For, when we know something, we cancel out everything else, as it were—this is often a fatal mistake. It reinforces our self-delusion.

Our sense-consciousness, in other words, is relative to what is in our minds and the sense-objects we experience. Our minds and sense-objects change all the time. If we regard what we see, hear, smell, taste or touch as being permanent or the absolute truth, then we would be badly and painfully mistaken.

A common mistake is to think people cannot change, that we are “what we are” or so-and-so is like “that.” We all change, like it or not. But we can direct that change in a wholesome manner if we know the Dharma. We need insight to do this. Insight means looking beyond the surface, “into” true reality, that is, understanding how our mind works and what is truly real (not just virtually real).

We begin to see patterns of conduct, habits and reactions that cause pain in us and to others. These have to be given up. We go on to cultivate lovingkindness, to accept ourselves happily and to do the same with others.

Buddhism is not about what we know or how much we know. It is about changing our lives for the better, about being a kinder and wiser person, more inclusive of others in our love and life.

3 Heaven can wait [R185]

Every religion has a set of beliefs, which become the basis for the conduct of the believer, giving him meaning and purpose in life. What sets religion apart from other fields of human knowledge and conduct (such as science and commerce) is religious ideals. It is also one religion's ideals that differentiate it from other religions.

For the purpose of this discussion, let us work on the assumption that there are two ideals of a religion, that is, the worldly and the spiritual, or the mundane and the supramundane. The worldly or mundane ideal is usually the founder of the religion himself, while the spiritual or supramundane ideal, as a rule, is the *summum bonum* or highest good.

In the God-religions, the worldly ideal is their religious founder or prophet, whom believers try to emulate in their daily or religious lives. In the case of Buddhism, our worldly ideal is the historical Buddha, whose life-story gives deep meaning to our lives, and our spiritual ideal is nirvana.

What is interesting with Buddhism is that for most Buddhists today the reality is that nirvana is like a distant star which not many think they can reach. The reality (of our times, that is) is that we have a self-limiting view, the real causes of which are our own worldliness (that is, our level of wealth, knowledge or delusion). However, those who respect the Buddha's wisdom, know that although they may not reach the stars (in this life anyway), they can still chart their lives by them.

There are at least two important reasons why Buddhists generally do not take the wish to attain nirvana lightly. Firstly, it is not a belief like "heaven" or some paradise which we could simply say "I believe" or say a prayer or a mantra, and be "assured" of it. If this

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were possible, there would not be as many conceptions of such heavens as there are their believers.

The point is that this is only a *view*, even a self-fulfilling wish, that tries to compensate for a deeper sense of inadequacy. That is why we are more likely to see such heaven-believers as being intolerant of others who do not hold such a view, or even of heaven-believers who define it differently. Such unbelievers or detractors are wishfully threatened with “hell.”

So if there is a heaven (or heavens), there is also a hell (or hells). The Buddhist teachings are that such states are not only *impermanent*—whatever exists must be impermanent—but they are also *mind-made*. There is a joke amongst some materialists, for example, that only good boring people are found in heaven, and that they would rather be in hell!

Such views however are mostly based on a notion of duality, of pleasure and pain, that heaven in a place of eternal pleasure, and hell, of eternal pain. We all know that such views are introduced by religions, and a religion starts at some point in human history (when humans are more developed in thinking and expressing themselves). The question that even an intelligent child might ask is “What about those people who lived before the religion started? Do they go to hell for something that has not happened?” It is like saying that we are suffering now because of something that happened in the future!

Using the ideas of heaven and hell to induce faith or strike fear in others is very unhealthy. They create problems where there were none. At best, we can say that these are *beliefs*—we have no empirical proof for this: we are unable to test them for truth and reality. We can only say “our holy book says so” (but there are many holy books, so it becomes political: my holy book is right, yours wrong); or “this reliable person says so” (again we need to define “reliable”).

3 Heaven can wait [R185]

If a belief—even a belief in heaven or paradise—is unhealthy, it is best not to have it. It is merely a belief, so we can choose what not to believe. We can and should free our minds from such beliefs by constantly examining why we are attracted to them in the first place, and why we are so intolerant of others. We need to seriously examine what and why it means to say, “I believe.”

Safer than saying “I believe” is to be able to say “I know.” To *know* means that we are able to experience something as real. Something is *real* when we can experience or feel it through any or all of our five physical senses. It is real when the same conditions arise again, we are *likely* to experience the same things again. So we know thus.

The word “likely” here is to caution us that our minds may not be paying attention to what is happening. If our mind is narrow, then we are likely to see only what we want to see. Indeed, the mind might even conjure up its own inner vision and project it onto our outside world. In this way, we are creating our own make-believe world.

Since we are talking about possible worlds, let us ask: “What is the best possible state of being?” Let us start with what we know: (1) We know that pleasure and pain are relative to and dependent on each other. So it is meaningless to define heaven as a place of eternal pleasure: no pain, no pleasure. (2) We know that a sense-based world exists because we can experience it. We can *know* things through our senses, and *what* we can know are sense-objects. If we work on understanding this second statement, we are on the right track to self-understanding.

Notice how when our senses, or any of them, have experienced to their fullest, surfeiting of their objects, they are momentarily at rest. After we have had a good meal, for example, we rest satiated. Or, conversely, once we see no reason for getting angry, we feel a deep sense of relief. In the language of our senses, this is a momentary

experience of nirvana. A deep sense of not needing to do anything else, as all have been done, as it were.

In short, nirvana is not only a better alternative to ideas of heaven or paradise or some other sense-based notions, nirvana is also possible. If not, there would be no true and complete way out of our sufferings.

4 Buddhist Questions [R187]

Buddhism today is not a monolithic religion, as it was in the Buddha's time and in the after-centuries. Latest researches have shown that the Buddha passed away around 410 BCE (give or take a margin of 10-20 years).⁹ Following such a dating, Bhante Sujato has worked out the following provisional periods of Buddhist sectarian evolution:

0-100 AB ¹⁰	integrated pre-sectarian Buddhism	410-310 BCE
100-200 AB	disintegrating pre-sectarian Buddhism	310-210 BCE
200-300 AB	emerging sectarian	210-110 BCE
300-400 AB	sectarian Buddhism	110 BCE-90 CE

Mahayana arose during the "emerging sectarian Buddhism" period. However, it should be understood that the sectarian differences lay more in their doctrinal views than in matters of monastic discipline. One such view is of the Buddha, whether he is a human or a divine being. The early "elders" (Sthavira), for example, keep to the teach

⁹ This is in accordance with the "Rhys Davids-Gombrich theory," see L S Cousins, "The dating of the historical Buddha: A review article," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Soc* 3.6.1, 1996:109 & Bhikkhu Sujato, *Sects & Sectarianism*, 2006:193 <http://sectsandsectarianism.googlepages.com>. The period terms used here are from Sujato.

¹⁰ AB = anno Buddha, ie, year(s) after the Mahaparinirvana (the Buddha's passing-away).

4 Buddhist Questions [R187]

ing that he is human, while the Sarvastivāda and later schools mostly see the Buddha as a divine being.

It is important to note here that these monastics, despite their different views, would often live together harmoniously in the same monastery. After all, even today, we know, for example, that not everyone holds the same view of the Buddha; and different Buddhists have different views of a “bodhisattva” (some take it to refer to the historical Buddha, while others take it to mean an “enlightenment being,” like Avalokitesvara or Guanyin). But no matter what their views, Buddhists, as a rule, are openly accepted and can live or practise in any monastery, temple or centre they choose.

In other words, there is a social cohesiveness amongst Buddhists since early times. We might even say that Buddhists, throughout their history, have generally been “ecumenical” in spirit, that is to say, they easily accept the differences in views of one another. This is what easily makes Buddhism a global religion in the past and today. However, this ecumenism is based on the fact that such “Buddhists” do study and know Buddhism well enough, or more technically, to have some practical understanding of the Dharma and Vinaya. And, ideally, they practise some Dharma-based meditation, too.

What is dividing Buddhism today is not the differences in ideas about the Buddha, the Dharma or the Vinaya. What divides Buddhists today is how we view our involvement in our world. In this very short reflection, let me state the basic problem as that of what our visions or ideals should be. This question can be ramified into two parts: (1) Who really is influencing our Buddhist vision? (2) What, as a Buddhist, is our true ideal, or what is our highest aim in life?

This short reflection is actually a fundamental question, or essential set of questions, for us to each answer for ourselves. My understanding is that if we keep asking the right questions, and we are

SIMPLE JOYS 3: Loving words

honest with ourselves and open to others, significant parts of our answers would overlap. And if more and more of us think in this way and put them into action, we would strengthen Buddhist ecumenism, and promote Buddhism locally and globally in significant ways. Here are then questions in greater detail:

Are we taking Buddhism merely as a cultural heritage? Asian communities have a rich history of cultural Buddhism: there are Chinese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, Sinhalese Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Thai Buddhism and so on. If we give a greater importance to the cultural prefix, our differences and our distance from the Buddha-Dharma would only grow. How can we give greater priority to the “Buddhism” that we all share to promote local Dharma growth?

How is our profession or socioeconomic status limiting or preventing our understanding of Buddhism, and how can we rise above this? Who really is influencing us in our Buddhist understanding and Buddhist work: is it a person or a teaching, and what does this tell about us?

Are we merely promoting an ethnic Buddhism, or are we working towards a global Buddhism? What is global Buddhism? Can there be a global Buddhism without a local Buddhism; or, what is the relationship or synergy between local Buddhism and global Buddhism?

As I have stated earlier, I give no answers here, but I hope these questions would help us look more deeply into ourselves and our activities in the Buddhist spirit. These questions are even more vital if we are Buddhist workers and leaders: for, what we think and do are likely to contribute to a better Buddhism, or otherwise slow down, even prevent, Buddhist growth in our own community.

The real roots that prevent Buddhist growth is not out there, but right here inside us. The roots for Buddhist growth, too, are here within our hearts.

5 How to end the world—really [R191]

Historically, there are two kinds of religion: those that try to terrify others and those that try to comfort others.¹¹ By “religion” here I mean any kind of belief that we regard as affecting us and our world. Those who use fear are usually from God-based religions that demand the total faith and loyalty of their followers. One of the most effective ways of asserting control over others or drawing them back into the fold is to claim that the world is ending.¹²

As early as around 2800 BCE, an Assyrian clay tablet warned that the world, on account of degeneracy, was going to end. In the year 1000, thousands of Christians across Europe awaited expectantly and hundreds of pilgrims went to Mount Zion to await the second coming of Jesus Christ.

In 1524, a German astronomer and preacher, named Johannes Stoeffler predicted that a great flood would end the world, and people built rafts and arks on the Rhine. When the waters did not rise, they deservedly threw him into a pond!

Modern doom-sayers have a more insidious effect with the help of the mass media, TV and the Internet. There were at least four doom predictions this year (2011), none of which happened. US evangelical preacher, Harold Camping, for example, revised his 21 May judgement day to 21 October. Before that, Camping said he was not giving away his possessions: “I shall have to live in a house, I still have to drive a car. What would be the value of that? If it is Judgement Day, why would I give it away?”¹³

¹¹ For a list of such religions and religious leaders, see eg Peter B Clark (ed), *Encyclopedia of New Religions*, Abingdon & NY: Routledge, 2006.

¹² For examples, see <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Ten-Notable-Apocalypses-That-Obviously-Didnt-Happen.html>

¹³ See Straits Times (Singapore) 29 May 2010, “Think” p38.

Informed Buddhists, however, remain unconcerned over such planned panic predictions. The reason is simple: the world would only end *after* the next Buddha, Maitreya, comes, which would be at least some millennia from now. Even then, world destruction will occur many millennia after that, from natural causes. Then, in due course, the world would re-evolve, and the cycle is endless.

What do we mean by “world”? There are three senses of the word: (1) the physical world, (2) the world as living beings, and (3) the world of formations. When other religions and people speak of “the end of the world,” they, as a rule, refer only to the first, that is, the physical world. When the physical world is destroyed, they think, all life, including human life, is destroyed, too.

In Buddhist cosmology, however, the universe itself is of three kinds or dimensions, that is, the physical world of the senses (which we inhabit), the “form” world whose beings, simply put, comprise of pure light, and thirdly, the “formless” world of beings of pure energy. Only the first, the physical world of the senses, is destroyed in space-time.

When our universe is destroyed, that is, when the physical world disintegrates, some of the beings are reborn into the form world or the formless world (both of which are unaffected by the cataclysm), or they are reborn into a parallel universe.¹⁴ In due course, the physical universe will re-evolve, and life will start all over again. This is Buddhist eschatology and cosmology.

Buddhist practitioners, however, are more concerned with the third definition of “world,” that is, the world of formations. Essentially, this is our sense-experiences, through which we create our own “world,” that is, a karma-based world that in turn feeds our rebirth

¹⁴ On parallel universes, see **Kosala Sutta 1** (A 10.29/5:59-65), SD 16.15. See **Aggañña Sutta** (D 27.10/3:84 f), SD 2.19 esp note on “mostly” at D 27.10a.

5 How to end the world—really [R191]

and suffering. In other words, this is karma and rebirth, or, if you like, the world of existential suffering. *This* is the world that needs to be ended, and the end of which leads to spiritual liberation or nirvana.

In this connection, **the Rohitassa Sutta** (S 2.26) records the Buddha as saying, “In this very fathom-long body, endowed with perception and mind, I declare the world, the arising of the world, the ending of the world, and the way leading to the ending of the world.”¹⁵ This is, of course, a clear reference to the four noble truths, that is, suffering (the unsatisfactoriness of our body-mind world), its arising, its ending, and the way to its ending.

The best way to do this is through the cultivation of a calm and clear mind (that is, meditation), which allows us to understand the true nature of suffering, seeing how it arises and ends. In meditation, when we attain full concentration, the mind temporarily transcends the body: we become mental beings. This, however, is only a momentary ending of the physical world.

As we progress deeper into our mental cultivation, our insight wisdom into suffering and the world becomes more profound and lasting. When we are able to truly free ourselves from all views, then we are really free from suffering, as we have ended the world of formations. The world has truly ended, and nirvana has arisen for us.

In other words, only through our insight wisdom can we really end the world. Otherwise, we can only make false predictions, generation after generation, bringing all kinds of unnecessary sufferings and problems to those who believe us. Anyway, if we keep on declaring that the world will end, we would surely be right one day, if that is all we care about.

¹⁵ S 2.26/1:61 f = A 4.45/2:47-49, SD 7.2.

6 Mad about meditation [R192]

The Straits Times of 1 June 2011 (page A30) carries an instructive article on “Meditation: Don’t overdo it” by Andy Ho. He refers specifically to two kinds of meditation systems: qigong and kundalini. Qigong is a Chinese form of self-directed meditation using various postures, breathing, visualization and relaxation to guide the qi (breath-energy) around the body or to someone for the purpose of “inner” power or healing.

In the hands of adepts, qigong may work. But novices who overindulge in prolonged qigong meditation may harm themselves. Medical literature, says Ho, attests that such novices have been known to literally go mad. After sitting for three to four hours of qigong meditation, for example, they begin to hear voices and see things, and can, as such, go mad. Fortunately, with proper anti-psychotic medication, such people can usually recover in a few days. The danger remains, however, that improper meditation can unhinge us.

Kundalini is an Indian form of meditation which sees the prana (the breath-energy) as a sort of “coiled up serpent” asleep at the base of the spine. Kundalini psychiatric symptoms, says Ho, are somewhat similar to those of qigong: trances and visions, unusual breathing patterns, convulsions and impossible yoga postures.

Such psychoses have also been noted in many other forms of meditation (including vipassana) when they are abused. Learned journals on psychotherapy, for example, have reported various psychological side-effects in long-term meditators and even experienced teachers.¹⁶ Such studies suggest that meditation may not be recommend-

¹⁶ See eg

<http://onwww.net/trancenet.org/research/2000perzdealbeniz.shtml> &
http://www.behind-the-tm-facade.org/transcendental_meditation-harmful-abstracts.htm.

6 Mad about meditation [R192]

ed for people with psychotic disorders, severe depression, and other serious personality disorders, unless they are also receiving psychological or medical treatment, and closely monitored so that they can receive support whenever needed.¹⁷

The vulnerable margin includes those who are under some kind of medication, or have a psychiatric history or some kind of undisclosed serious personal issues. For such people who do unguided or unmonitored long sittings, or attend intensive meditation courses, their situation could worsen or other symptoms could arise. Individuals who are aware of an underlying psychiatric disorder who wish to take up meditation should speak with a mental health professional or experienced instructor before doing so.¹⁸

Some critics take issue with the Buddhist notion of “not-self,” especially in regard to cases of the deepest psychopathological problem, where it is helpful for them to achieve an adequate level of personality organization. In other words, quoting Engler, they think that “you have to be somebody before you can be nobody.”¹⁹ Experienced Buddhist meditation teachers, as a rule, do not begin with methods related to not-self. Not-self might, however, be taught to beginners as basic theory. In practical terms, “not-self” is best seen as the goal of Buddhist meditation, rather than a meditation method.

Even when not-self is taught as meditation theory, it is explained in relation to the notion of impermanence. Everything, especially the mind, is impermanent; what is impermanent does not have an abiding essence. In other words, all problems are impermanent. There are only problems, not persons. The idea here is to examine ourself-

¹⁷ See **Meditation & consciousness**, SD 17.8c (8.4).

¹⁸ For more details, see **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 esp (14).

¹⁹ See Piya Tan, *Revisiting Buddhism*, 2011 ch 14.

ves as processes and conditions, and to understand them. The clearer this understanding is, the more effective the self-healing.²⁰

The fact remains that the most wholesome contemplative method is Buddhist meditation. “Buddhist” here refers to early Buddhist trainings in ethical discipline, mental cultivation and insight wisdom. If any of these vital Buddhist trainings is removed, garbled, or watered down, there is no guarantee of the benefits that are attested in the ancient texts.

The meditator, troubled by mental hindrances (sensual lust, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt),²¹ can only “meditate, pre-meditate, over-meditate, out-meditate.”²² In other words, he is often, even constantly, troubled by greed, by hate, by delusion, or by fear.

Meditation for beginners is likely to be wholesomely effective when the following minimum conditions are present:

- (1) Participants must resolve their emotional or psychological issues first (such as through counseling or personal meditation coaching).
- (2) The instructor is an experienced teacher, with sufficient spiritual training.
- (3) Breath meditation and lovingkindness cultivation are taught in a balanced manner.

²⁰ See eg Piya Tan, *Simple Joys*, 2009, ch 8.4.

²¹ For detailed studies on the 5 mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*), see **Mental hindrances**, SD 32.1.

²² See: **Māra Tajjaniya Sutta** (M 50.13/1:334), SD 36.4 (pl) (attacks directed at the Buddha and his monks); **Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta** (M 108.26-27/3:13 f), SD 33.5. **Mahā Cunda Sutta** (A 6.46) has *pajjhāyati* (“he is consumed in meditation”) (A 6.46.2/3:355 = SD 4.6), a wordplay (reflecting disapproval): see (3.1).

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- (4) The beginners' group is small, comprising not more than, say, fifteen participants.
- (5) The environment is quiet and conducive, and there are basic standing rules (such as switching off handphones).
- (6) The length of sitting is flexible, depending on the ability and inclination of the student.
- (7) The instructor keeps to an ethical code and is easily available for related consultation.
- (8) Avoid commercial meditation courses: we get only a kick at an exorbitant cost.²³

The best tool for cultivating inner stillness and self-healing is a hearty selfless meditation.²⁴

7 Thoughtless meditation [R193]

In our daily lives, we are fully dependent on our physical senses to see, to hear, to smell, to taste, and to touch. These same sources of our world, and all that we can know, are also what limit us from really experiencing life to the fullest. The main reason for this is that we tend to convert all, or significantly much, of our experiences into words.

In other words, we rarely experience what are really before us. We merely convert experiences into words and talk to ourselves in our heads about what we see, hear, smell, taste or touch. We almost never see the beauty of things as they are, or enjoy the goodness of others as they are. We are often helplessly projecting our past experiences and ideas onto what are before us.

²³ On the dangers of TM (Transcendental Meditation), see <http://www.-suggestibility.org/>.

²⁴ On Buddhist meditation, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1.

SIMPLE JOYS 3: Loving words

Even as you are reading this: notice the talk going on in your head. There is a lot we can learn about ourselves here, if we are courageous and honest enough to be true to ourselves. At this stage, we are but the voices in our heads.

Buddhism speaks of three kinds of knowledge. The first kind of knowledge is known as “hearing-based knowledge,” that is, what we learn from outside of ourselves, from others. It is not altogether useless, since this is how we communicate with others. However, as we well know, it is not a perfect means of communication. This might be called “third-hand” knowledge.

The second level of knowledge is called “thinking-based knowledge.” This is something we realize for ourselves by watching patterns of words, ideas and behaviour. We mostly think this out for ourselves. Hence, it is a more personal kind of knowledge, but it is at best “second-hand” knowledge. This is because we are still dependent on outside information, which we now examine more carefully for ourselves.

The third kind of knowledge, the highest kind, is of course “first-hand” knowledge. This is “meditation-based knowledge,” or better “cultivation-based knowledge.” This is an understanding of true reality that arises from self-realization, uncoloured by sense-experiences, and which the mind sees directly, seeing things as they really are.

To have a better idea of this kind of knowledge, we need to have some understanding of what happens in deep meditation, or what is known as dhyana (Pali *jhāna*). This is the state of the mind fully focused upon itself, free from projections and limitations of the physical senses. It is a profoundly calm and clear mind that truly and joyfully feels itself. When such a mind emerges from this inner bliss, it is able to truly and joyfully see the world outside, too. Then the world is really beautiful, without even singing about it.

7 Thoughtless meditation [R193]

From a close study of the sutta passages on dhyana and from the teachings of those familiar with dhyana, we know that dhyana is a state free of any thought-process or word-based activity, a state so profoundly blissful that it would naturally preclude even knowing (that is, the working of the senses). In other words, it is not an intellectual process, but an utterly *affective* state. In short, we cannot *know* dhyana; we can only *feel* it. This vital point is highlighted in **the (Ekā, dasaka) Cetanā'karaṇīya Sutta** (A 11.2).²⁵

Brahmavamso, a well known meditation teacher in Australia, summarizes the characteristics or landmarks of all dhyanas as follows:

- (1) There is no possibility of thought.
- (2) No decision-making process is available.
- (3) There is no perception of time.
- (4) Consciousness is non-dual, making comprehension inaccessible.
- (5) Yet one is very, very aware, but only of bliss that doesn't move.
- (6) The five senses are fully shut off, and only the sixth sense, mind, is in operation.

(Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond, 2006:155)

From all these characteristics, it is clear that a dhyana is utterly *affective* in nature: we only *feel* it without knowing it, that is, without a thought or word. This is not difficult to imagine even if we have never tasted dhyana before. Recall a time when you were truly happy, such as winning a special prize, or an extraordinarily joyful event. If you were asked, "How do you feel?" you can only perhaps say, "I don't know... it's just wonderful!"

The Buddhist way of knowing is a truly joyful one. It is only when we are joyful we can really learn to be at peace with ourselves. Only

²⁵ See SD 33.3b.

with this profound joy and peace can we really accept others unconditionally to help and heal them. Better than this, we are able to teach others to be joyful like ourselves, so that they too can enjoy the same peace. This is Buddhist meditation.

8 To be Buddhist is to see beyond Buddhism [R194]

A religion, if we look deep enough into it, is a narrative of the struggles of a tribe for self-preservation. These religious narrators had (and have) the imagination and expression of whom we today call science fiction writers and group leaders. The big difference is that the religious spinners actually believe or want others to believe their fiction to be fact, and to live by that.

Even today we have new religions, albeit on a more global scale. In the 2001 census, for example, 390,127 people in England and Wales stated that their religion was “Jedi,” the knights of the Star Wars science fiction series. Effectively, it was the fourth largest religion there (0.8%), surpassing even Sikhism, Judaism and Buddhism. Similar “Jedi census phenomenon” is found in many other English-speaking countries.²⁶

What can we learn from all this? That we are drawn to what we see as sources of power? Especially the power of good against evil? Or, are we simply romantics who idolize a good narrative? It is possible that it is our innate desire for good and growth that draws us to such narratives.

Simply put we sense a source of joy in them, and wish to be lost in them: it is like falling in love, but with an idea, a vision. If such a vision helps us to move on into ever clearer self-discovery and human

²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jedi_census_phenomenon#cite_note-nationalstatistics-9.

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liberation, surely it must be worthwhile. In other words, such narratives inspire a wholesome change in us.

The slough of religion must be shed as we mature in our understanding of religiosity. If not, we would remain as a self-devouring uroboros, a snake eating its own tail. Only when the caterpillar breaks out of its cocoon, can it freely fly and pollinate the flowers so that they may fruit.

Religion, especially organized and world religions and their local manifestations, have become almost nothing more than means of dominating (even destroying) others, an oligarchy of the powerful and the priestly over the minds of the many. Religion has become crowd-control and sheep-herding, a crowded noisiness, rather than a loving way teaching us to rise above the crowd and noise to become true individuals.

Religion today is a multinational corporation run by an individual or a group, to systematically exploit us in every way, sucking away valuable and limited resources of followers and the unwary, with empty promises of this-life material euphoria and immediate blessings, or as after-life dividends. Religious leaders promise to liberate “all beings” when they have not even been freed from their mutual hatred and distrust. Their bush of global prayer is mostly a disguised desire for world domination.

Why not simply tell others the simple good news that we can all, every one of us, save ourselves, if we want to. Indeed, the real blessings and succour that we, if we are truly religious, enjoy are, in fact, our own natural goodness that shyly hides in our hearts even before we know religion. If so, then, religion can be hazardous to our already good mental and social health.

We rarely choose a religion on account of its truth. For, if this were so, once we have found it, we do not need it any more! The reality is that we are more likely to seek a religion, or an aspect of religios-

ity, that agrees with our pet ideas and wants. Religion tends to be the short end of our short-comings. If we are bad, religion often justifies it; if we are already good, we tend to see religion as good, perhaps. If we are small-hearted or big-headed, we tend to look for endorsement from a teacher or a teaching. If we are big-hearted or open-minded, we tend to see the goodness of a teacher or a teaching in our own image.

Indeed, many of us have lost the power of listening and feeling. The moment we hear something that seems worthwhile, we often fail to reflect deeply enough on how our lives could be richer or freer on account of it. Or, if we perceive a critical feedback, we see it as a dagger before us, pointing at our ego-balloon of past wind. So we constantly lie in a bed of knives.

A true religion is one that helps us to understand how we view the world, and how our senses create our worlds. Yet we neither directly nor truly experience the world of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch. We look at the present moment but see only ghosts of the past.

So we judge the present, whether a person or a thing, in terms of what we tasted in the past as being pleasant, as painful or as neutral. If we perceive a present person or event as reminding us of a past pleasurable experience, we would like it (again). If we assume an event before us as invoking an unpleasant or painful memory, we would see pain in the present (again). And if we fail to link the here and now to something from our past, we tend to simply ignore it, and so reinforce and perpetuate our ignorance.

Those who sense such habits of the heart, are likely, in their devious moments, to invoke such ideas in us, too, and so manipulate us like shrewd peddlers their customers, or wily conmen their victims. Our greed, hate, delusion and fear are lightning rods in such a merciless storm. If we fail to see the karmic nature of actions and consequen-

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ces, then whatever is good in us could be misdirected and exploited by others.

The Buddha teaches us firstly to notice how noisy our minds are, and how cluttered our hearts have become. The noise and clutter are our own reactivity to those of others when we are unwilling or unable to feel what others are saying or doing. To “feel” here means to see beyond our immediate perceptions, and to learn from what is unspoken and silent. To feel is to see the whole picture, and become a healing or joyful part of it.

Buddhism, as taught by the Buddha, is a reminder that there are moments when we need to forget ourselves, to let go even of our Buddhisms, to see beyond religion itself, before we can truly see ourselves. When we have even a glimpse of our true self, it is easier then for us to see the minds and hearts of others.

People can be full of precious surprises, and it is always a joy to be surprised by their goodness and joy. To allow joyful surprises into our lives, we must first remove what prevents us from being surprised in the first place. This, we must uncover for ourselves. We must ourselves rise beyond and free ourselves from this. Let us surprise ourselves.

9 We are the world [R195]

[This is a spiritual exercise reflecting on our true nature that we are connected with one another and everything else. It is best heard rather than read. As such, you might like to read and record this passage for your own reflection, and in a quiet moment listen mindfully to it. This helps you to have a peaceful and clear mind. It can also be read to a sick or dying person for his or her peace of mind.]

There are four basic ways making us what we are. For simplicity, let us call them elements: they are the world or ecosystem we have created for ourselves.

SIMPLE JOYS 3: Loving words

We are each an ecosystem unto ourselves. The earth is our physical body. Water is our blood, sweat, tears, urine, and the liquid that we mostly are. Fire burns our inner engines, propelling us on, burning up food for energy, burning ourselves up for ourselves. We are the wind: we move. Everything in us is moving: our limbs move, our hearts beat. Our gullets push food and drink down into our bellies. There it churns itself and is then drunk by our bodies. Then it moves the other way down and out.

We are an ecosystem unto ourselves. Like all ecosystems, we are linked to others. The earth in our body is the same earth that we stand on: it supports us unconditionally, just as the trees grow on it, and myriad animals feed on it. The earth is all around us. The earth inside, the earth outside, is the same earth. It is cycling and recycling, perpetually moving, changing, within and without.

The water that is our body is the same water that falls from the heavens; that washes down mountains; that waters the fields; that feeds the plants; that fills the lakes, moves the rivers and fills the oceans. The water within, the water outside, is the same water. It is the water we clean and cool ourselves with; that we drink and quench our thirst. It is the water that flows through our bodily openings and pores back into the water cycle. Water is ever flowing, changing, within and without.

The fire that is our body, burning through the ages, is the same fire as the stars, the sun's warmth, light and energy. It is in the green of plants and in every colour of life. It is the fire that, uncomplaining, devours everything it is fed. It cooks our food, and burns what we eat, and lights up our lives. It is the fire of decay: we age with it. We begin as a tiny spark like daybreak, then a twinkling star, bursting into a nebula, and then an adult galaxy, only to slowly cool into a white star in the western sky. Like the stars, we are ever burning, changing within and without.

9 We are the world [R195]

We are an eternal cycle of moving things, never resting a moment, even when we sleep. Our bodies are in a state of ever moving, especially our breath. The wind from outside enters our noses and mouths, and descends into the lungs, to be absorbed into our blood and the rest of the body. Then out again the wind goes laden with bodily impurities. The wind that is our breath feeds us with life, and strengthens our minds. If we breathe rightly, it stills and clears our hearts, too.

The breath that we take, the breath that we give, it is the wind that is all around us. It moves through the windows of life down into all our vital organs, into every cell. And then out again through our system, back into the world outside. This breath is our life, truly and ever a friend, loyal from the start to the end. This is the same breath others breathe: those we love, those we hate, those we ignore. It is the breath of all bodily beings.

This breath is the door to our heart. A door that only opens with the key of inner stillness. It is a key we can and must seek for ourselves. This key is not seen by the eye, nor heard by the ear, nor smelt by the nose, nor tasted by the tongue, nor felt by the body. It is a key shaped by our heart, still with joy. It is an invisible key that only appears when we look deep into the living breath. When we look deep and gently, it opens the breath-door into our heart.

Once the breath-door is open, we cannot but enter. It is a world no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, can sense. There is no coming, no going, no standing. It is neither here, nor there, nor in between. There is no rising, no falling, no change. Here, earth, water, fire, and wind find no footing. There is no body to mind, nor any mind to embody.

Only when we return through the breath-door, back into our thoughts and feelings, that we know it is a truly profound bliss. Yet no word can fully describe this bliss. For words need thoughts,

words need breaths. We have tasted a sweetness that is beyond both thought and breath. Now we see ourselves and the world anew in a joyful light that is truly still and clear.

10 Better change ourselves than change religion

[R196]

Unlike other world religions, early Buddhism does not teach a supreme deity, world-creation, world peace, or even prayer for succour. Or, we can say that early Buddhism does not speak of such issues as the evangelical and moneytheistic religions do. The evangelical religions want to dominate the world: they have a “world vision.” The moneytheistic religions (including some “modern” forms of Buddhism) are mostly interested in financial success and social domination.

We can say that these are the “macro” religions: they think big: they want to take charge of others, dominate society and the world. Often they think so big, as religious history attests, they even wage religious wars and commit religious violence. It seems as if they have become so big that they cannot help themselves. But the great disadvantage and danger of this is that it neglects a vital small detail: the individual and personal development.

Early Buddhism does not teach a supreme deity, for the simple reason nobody has seen one, we do not need one, and there are insurmountable philosophical problems about the notion. It might have been best, if such a deity exists, for him to appear in person publicly and tell all those who speak for him to stop doing so. But since he does not, anyone can say anything about him and do anything in his name. Some might say this is a supreme form of religious anarchy.

10 Better change ourselves than change religion [R196]

Religion should be a way of leaving God alone, that is, until we actually meet him face to face, and let him speak for himself.²⁷

Early Buddhism does not teach world-creation because there is no supreme creator. If we begin at the beginning, first things first, then we must admit that the notion that everything must have a beginning is simply due to the limits of our own thinking, our philosophical poverty (as Bertrand Russell puts it). Whatever exists (including God) must exist in time; hence, whatever exists must be impermanent. Time necessarily has no beginning. Numbers, too, have no beginning: it makes no sense to ask when did the numbers 1 or 1000 begin? Eastern philosophies and religions generally have a cyclic concept of time, and as such do not have the problems of a first beginning or final ending. Things seem to go in endless circles, if we really look closely.

God-religions tend to have a linear conception of time. God, it seems, creates the world at point A, and in due course decides to end it, at point B. Do not ask: what happens before A? or, who created the creator? Then there's no problem. This is called a dogma: it discourages thinking and reasoning. Yet compared to eternity, our worldly life is just a tick in cosmic time, and we are challenged to decide between an eternal heaven and eternal hell.

As cosmic infants, we are told to decide our own destiny, without ever being taught about accountability for our own actions. We are enticed with promises of heavenly joy and threatened with the pains of hell so that we keep in line. But, if there is an almighty God, who really is responsible for our actions?

How can we ever know heavenly pleasure or happiness when there is no suffering in heaven? How can we know hell's pains, when there are no pleasures there for us to define pain with? Anyway, this

²⁷ See further "Please leave God alone," Piya Tan, *Simple Joys*, 2009:15.3.

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problem seems to be solving itself, as most God-believers today avoid mentioning them.

True divinity is unconditional love. It is to accept and respect others just as they are, and to begin there, to gently and patiently raise them to greater heights, to our own level, even beyond. True divinity is compassion, that is, to show kindness even when others do not deserve it. (For, if they deserve it, it is simply gratitude.) True divinity is appreciative joy, rejoicing in the goodness of others, being happy at the happiness of others. True divinity is our heart's equanimity, a gentle silence and inner peace when even our best efforts fail. For, beings fare according to their own actions. There comes a time when even the most caring parent must let the growing child leave the safe shade of the family tree, so that he can discover his own goodness.

Early Buddhism does not teach world peace. Frankly, I don't think any religion really teaches world peace, much less bring world peace. A religion tends to speak more for itself and for its own glorification. There is no religion that really says, please choose the religion you like, or you don't need to have a religion. Hence, religion is a self-contradiction, when, claiming to care for everyone, or to pray for world peace, it really thinks only of its own good. Religion is often a clever way of saying that when we fail (being bad, etc), it's our fault, but when we succeed (being kind, etc), it is because of religion, or *my* religion to be exact. The point is that there is neither good or bad *religion*, nor are there good or bad *people*. There are only good or bad *thoughts and actions*.

When a religion is alone and supreme, it will turn on its own kind. These self-inflicted sufferings only end perhaps when there are other religions, seen as a threat to itself. Then, there are inter-religious conflicts and violence. We might say there are only two kinds of religions: mine and yours. And mine is always the best, that is until I switch to another.

10 Better change ourselves than change religion [R196]

Nowadays, religions are learning to accept one another somewhat more, not because they are more enlightened, but often because of the moderating presence of a secular government, or that science and free learning tell us more useful truth than religion does.

We are at peace today *not* because of religion. Our global peace and progress are the blood, tears and toil of so many visionary individuals working for political freedom, open education, social justice and common sense. If religions were left to their own devices, as during the colonial days or the centuries before that, I would not even be able to write this reflection, and you would not be free to read this.

Early Buddhism does not teach prayer, even for succour. There are those who will hug the clay feet of idols, or cry out to unseen beings, or commit bizarre silliness and atrocities when they feel they are in dire need of help. Or, they would pray for their own success, and the defeat of their opponents. Indeed, if everyone's prayers were answered, even if we limit this only to those of God-believers, we would mutually wipe ourselves completely out in a blink. This is more destructive than any weapon of mass destruction!

The Buddha declares that if we wish to have long life, beauty, happiness, fame or heavenly life, prayer does not help at all. The only way to win these blessings is to live our lives in a manner conducive to such goals. If we wish to have long life, we need to live healthily. If we want to be beautiful, we must keep to rules of good health, hygiene and beauty. If we want to be happy, we need to learn how to make others happy. If we wish to be famous, we must live a life that is virtuous and blameless. If we want to go to heaven, we must conduct ourselves as if this life is heaven itself, that there are gods

and angels—those great in virtue—around us, if we care to look closely enough.²⁸

The truest religion is when we look into the eyes of the suffering, and see compassion, and we move our limbs with unconditional love to lessen that suffering. Even better, we teach those in pain how to help themselves. Above all, we need to teach ourselves to look within, where the real roots of suffering lie, and to remove them.

11 Not by food alone but by joy, too [R197]

Man must not live by food alone. Even if we have the best food, the most delicious meals prepared by the best chefs there are, we have not really lived. Merely to eat is only to exist, to be like a well-cared-for pet in a safe home, or like a rooted plant sucking up nutriments from around it. Even if its home is a millionaire's mansion or a royal palace, a pet is still a beast, even if a refined one.

If we feed only the body, especially if we live to eat, then we are merely feeding the animal in us. If we feed the animal too long and too often, we become it: we are it. Why are we stuck in this rut? Because after a while, the eating is no more fun. So we keep on wanting more and more. There is no end to the hunger: we have become pretas, ghosts.

We take food to feed our bodies, but we are not just bodies. We are also minds, which need a different kind of food. The mind feeds on contact, here a special term meaning sense-stimuli. The mind is fed by what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. The mind makes “sense” of these physical sense-experiences, but it has its own mind-objects, too. It creates its own “ideas” of these sense-

²⁸ See **Iṭṭha Sutta** (A 5.43/3:47-49), SD 12.4 (2). See also “Prayer without words,” *Simple Joys 2*, 2011 ch 44.

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experiences, which shoot through our minds in all directions without end. We call them “thoughts,” or when we are asleep, “dreams.”

Our minds are also fed by the motives behind all our actions. We are drawn to what we perceive as pleasurable, we try to push away what we perceive as undesirable, and we ignore what we think is unfamiliar, what does not “ring a bell.” So our lust, hate and delusion grow. In fact, every moment we are awake (unless we are having a very good meditation), we are but puppets whose strings are pulled by these three motivational roots, as they are called.

We have free will, so we think. “I choose what I want. I reject what I don’t like. I ignore what doesn’t matter to me.” That’s the point: we cannot do anything *but* do what we want, reject what we do not like, ignore what does not matter to us. We do not really have a choice. We do not really have free will.

If we notice ourself becoming a bit upset here, it just proves the point. We have no choice but to be upset! Or, we might think, “No, I actually like this part!” Again, we have no choice but to like it. Or, “Oh, I don’t care either way!” We are compelled by the motivational roots to react in this manner. We don’t really have any choice.

What’s going on here? We are simply reacting to what we are reading here. We are not watching how we are reacting. If we watch our minds more carefully, more patiently, we would begin to notice how our minds really work. Suffice it to say that we need good mindfulness for this, and this best comes with proper meditation.

Our minds are also fed by consciousness, here meaning our compulsion or urgent drive to *name* people and things. One of the first things we do when we meet someone is to ask the person’s name. When we know the names of things (such as gadgets we use), we at once are able to say what they are the next time we hear those names. The most superficial of this mind-feeding is the naming of

high-class brands. We falsely think we are high-class, too, just knowing their names or putting them to our bodies. Our prehistoric ancestors did this, too, anyway, mostly to show their status and throw their weight around.²⁹

So our minds are fed by three kinds of food, and we don't really have much control over them, unless we are really mindful, and this is cultivated through proper meditation. Mindfulness means keeping our minds in the present moment, that is, keeping our attention right here, right now. The positive effects of mindfulness are best seen when we keep our attention on a peaceful mental object such as the breath.

The more we watch our breath in relaxed meditation, the more peaceful our breath becomes. If we do this properly and regularly enough, we begin to feel a deep sense of bliss, which keeps growing and pervading our whole being. We are now feeding ourselves with joy. One great thing about this joy is that it is the inspiration from which great and good ideas arise, and beautiful and joyful things are created. We have become true artists of truth and beauty.

12 To be Bodhisattva, be an arhat first³⁰ [R198]

If we care to spend some time studying the early Buddhist texts, we would notice that, contrary to common Mahayana belief, arhats can be as compassionate as, if not more than, Mahayana Bodhisattvas. Take, for example, Sāriputta, the wisest of the arhats after the

²⁹ (*Nīvaraṇa Bojjhaṅga*) *Āhāra Sutta* (S 46.51/5:102-107), SD 7.15.

³⁰ This reflection is inspired by a lecture by Prof Luis O Gomez on "Mahayana Buddhism: Images of Liberation, Acceptance, and Adaptation to the Needs of Others," at the Higashi Honganji Betsuin, Honolulu, Hawaii, on 12 June 2010: <http://www.livingdharma.org/Living.Dharma-Articles/MahayanaBuddhism-Gomez.html>.

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Buddha.³¹ He is well known for his great compassion and humility just as he is greatly wise.³²

Indeed, we must say that arhats are compassionate in the real sense of the word, while the Bodhisattvas do not exist (historically) like the arhats. Mahayana Bodhisattvas, as we know, do not exist like you and I exist. They are embodiments of various qualities of the Buddha, such as compassion (Avalokiteśvara) and wisdom (Mañjuśrī). They serve as objects of meditation.

In later times, as Buddhism grew farther away, as well as further away, from India, such Bodhisattvas became practically gods who are said to be able to respond to our prayers. This of course only made Buddhism more popular, but such teachings are not found in early Buddhism. They are cultural Buddhisms and magical Buddhisms.

Yes, prayers to Bodhisattvas do get answered, as do prayers by millions other non-Buddhists in other religions. No religion has the exclusive right to answering prayers: even the prayers of non-religious people get answered. This has to do with the psychology of prayer and statistics, than whether a religion is true or not. The problem is that people often never talk about their prayers that are not answered.³³

Mahayanists, as we know, distinguish arhats from Buddhas or Bodhisattvas in that the arhats do not vow to save all sentient beings, but are “only” concerned with their own buddhahood. Professor Gomez wondered if this is a kind of “Mahayana joke.” In fact, he said, rather than seeking to be a Bodhisattva, it would be better to

³¹ See also Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004 ch 5.10-36.

³² See eg **Vuṭṭha Vass'āvāsa Sutta** (A 9.11/4:373-378), SD 28.2a.

³³ See **Iṭṭha Sutta** (A 5.43/3:47-49), SD 12.4 (2). See also “Prayer without words,” Piya Tan, *Simple Joys 2*, 2011 ch 44..

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be an arhat because it's much easier. We should think twice before we take the Bodhisattva vows: we have to save all sentient beings!

In the Mahayana approach, there must be a strong quest for inner peace at the same time. Furthermore, because we live in a messy world, there must also be a strong commitment to be of service to others.

One of the most important aspects of the Mahayana Bodhisattva is that they don't stay either on "this shore" of our everyday world or on the "other shore" of enlightenment. The Mahayana texts tell us that they move back and forth in their efforts to save all sentient beings. In order to do so, they must adapt to others' needs.

What does it mean to adapt to others' needs? Part of the answer is in the later Buddhist tradition of having so many different kinds of images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, deities and demons. Take the example of a mother, suggests Prof Gomez: what does a mother do when her infant cries? If the mother merely says, "Shhh ...," it is not likely to work. Instead, the mother would look at her baby in the eye and say in gentle baby talk, "Ohhh...what's the matter?..." The baby might not understand her words, but it would surely get the sense that "Mom cares and is listening to my needs." This is adapting to others: it is actively listening and caring for others.

Wouldn't it be wrong if we talked about wise Buddhas and compassionate Bodhisattvas, but we do not actively listen or really care for others? We do not unconditionally accept others, like the mother her child? Or worse, we simply use these ideas to make people serve and support us. It only shows that we do not ourselves even believe in the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas.

So how do we, as true Buddhists, adapt ourselves to exemplify the wisdom of the Buddha and the compassion of the Bodhisattvas? Surely, we need to calm ourselves first, and with that calmness, to

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go on to cultivate wisdom. We do not really become calm, wise and compassionate simply by chanting the Buddha's names or worshipping Bodhisattva images.

We need to emulate their qualities. We become calm and wise by recollecting the virtues of the historical Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha (that is, his saints, including the arhats). We cultivate calm and wisdom through lovingkindness and breath meditations. This way, we are at peace with ourselves and can unconditionally accept all beings (even those we do not like).

In other words, we need to be like the arhats. The ancient arhats emulated the Buddha. They knew the difficulties that the Buddha went through in the many lives he spent as a bodhisattva. The small "b" means that the Buddha really lived as a historical person cultivating bodhisattva qualities of charity, moral virtue, patience, energy, concentration, and wisdom. The Buddha was not a Mahayana Bodhisattva.

Before we even think of liberating "all" beings, indeed, even of helping a single person in need, we must prepare ourselves with wisdom and compassion. In other words, we need to practise what the arhats have practised: the Buddha's teachings. We need to be an arhat first before we even think of becoming a Bodhisattva.

13 Religion without words [R199]

Generically, there are two kinds of religions: the word-based and the word-free. The word-based religion is, as defined, based on words, especially a holy book that is believed to contain "the Word." The word-free religion, on the other hand, is a training to see words for what they are, and to free ourselves beyond even holy scripture, so that we have a direct vision of true reality.

The earliest religions, even primitive beliefs, in essence, teach us to see the world for what it is, even if in a harmlessly imperfect way.

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They use a minimum of words, but a constant observing of nature and human behaviour. We are instructed and encouraged to live in harmony with others, with people as well as with animals and nature, with the animate and the inanimate.

The primitive religions, crude as they may seem to us, are deeply rooted in respect for others. Respect here means accepting others and our environment unconditionally. We then had greener trees, clearer streams, cleaner water and fresher air. The big religions of today are nothing more than big businesses bogged down with the buying and selling of souls, and they are very noisy.

As human society became more sophisticated, its religions, too, became more power-centred. In due course, as tribes grew larger, their leaders found it easier to control others and thus ensure its survival by using word-based religions. These leaders used words and ideas to construct fictional beings and virtual realities, promising power and freedom. Even today, we can notice how such religions often employ the language of power and dominance.

As language evolved, and philosophy grew, these ancient leaders and teachers discovered that they could conjure up images and emotions in others, and so control them. What is interesting is that if we use these same words, even the most wise, on say animals, or the trees, or even mountainous rocks, they have no effect at all on them. The reason is simple: they do not have minds, they do not use words, they do not understand language, not human language, anyway. The lesson is clear: use your mind, or others will use it. Your mind: use it or lose it.

Human language, in other words, is our means of communication and of social conditioning. Interestingly, although the kind of language we grow up with gives us the means of communicating and learning, yet this same language also limits the way we think and feel, and may even hinder our spiritual growth.

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Yet, a human by nature is deeply curious. There are moments when we want to know what lies beyond words. When we were hearty children, and if we are still joyfully child-like, our imaginative powers are likely to be boundless. We could, for example, imagine what lies beyond our homes, neighbourhood, society, country, world or universe. The word-based religions have always tried to stop such dangerous investigations. Dangerous, that is, to such religions. For, they thrive on faith, especially unquestioning faith, and not to question what we do not understand.

Believe, they proclaim, that we might know! But what kind of knowledge is this? If I believe white is black, it might be said to be knowledge, but it is a false, or at best incomplete, knowledge. And if we are filled with such half-knowledge and false conceptions, our actions are unlikely to benefit anyone. Indeed, we can see that much human follies and sufferings are directly or indirectly caused by such word-based blindness.

Around the 6th century, a great movement began in the middle Gangetic plains of northern India, against the word-based religion of the brahmins, powerful priests who spun stories how they were born from the mouth of primal man or of God himself. The nobles, they claimed, were from his arms; the merchants, his thighs; and the workers, his feet. You would be lucky, it seemed, to be included in one of these classes. If not, you would be the outcastes.

The more wordy a religion is, the more it wants us to hand over our remote control. We should never hand over our remote (our mind) to anyone else, no matter how saved, or attained, or how enlightened, or how charming or how charismatic the preacher, priest, guru or teacher appears to be. If we hand over our remote to anyone else, then we become mindless robots, blinded moths perilously flying around a naked blaze.

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Such wordy narratives chain us, not liberate us. To be truly free, we must reject such wordiness, or simply take them for what they are: stories. One of the best ways to free ourselves from such a tyranny of words and word-religions, however, is to feel the liberating power of silence. On a simple level, we can speak of two kinds of silence: the outer and the inner.

The outer silence is the rejection of using words to dominate others so as to prevent their own emotional and spiritual liberation. We should avoid words that arouse fear in others, or hurt them, or hinder personal growth. We need to understand how our five physical senses and our minds create the world around us.

The best way to create a healthy and harmonious world is to understand and enjoy inner silence. But first, we need to investigate the nature of our senses and our minds. We create our own worlds. Occasionally, we need to turn our senses inwards to give them a rest, as it were. Just let them be, at peace with themselves.

We need to enjoy the inner silence of our hearts. It is the stillness, the source of all goodness. It is the still centre of life's storm. It is the eye of the storm that is ever peaceful. This is the true heart of our lives.

A simple way to be truly at peace with ourselves is to spend a few minutes, doing nothing but enjoying the way we breathe. Naturally and simply breathe in, feeling "peace!"; naturally and simply breathe out, feeling "peace!" We don't even need to be religious to do this. Yet this is more peaceful than any religion can ever be.

If we can really taste this inner bliss, no matter what religion we belong to, or to none, we would be able to see a higher meaning to everything. We begin to understand ourselves better, and so understand others and the world better, too. We begin to feel truly liberated.

14 Buddhas die if we worship them³⁴ [R200]

THE HEROIC LIFE. The Pali word for “nervousness” or “fearfulness” is *sārajja*, and its opposite is *vesārajja*, “moral courage, intrepidity.”³⁵ To be nervous means to be nose-led by our “nerves,” that is, our physical body, putting undue importance to our physical being and appearance. When we are attached to physical things, we *fear* losing them, as they are by nature *impermanent*, a truth which we are either unwilling or unable to accept.

In the **Soṇa,daṇḍa Sutta** (D 4), we see how the kiasu³⁶ brahmin Soṇa,daṇḍa’s fear of losing face is motivated by his desire for respect and patronage of his peers, without which his status and wealth would diminish. After all, he is the lord of Campā, a fief given to him by the rajah Bimbi,sāra.³⁷ He is clearly nose-led by “social fearfulness” (*sārajja*).³⁸ Suffice it here for us to note that according to the **Sārajja Sutta** (A 5.101), the opposite of social fearfulness is intrepidity (*vesārajja*) or true confidence.

The **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1) and the nine discourses following it are all reflections on the *impermanence* of our senses, external sense-objects and other aspects of our being, either through *faith* (that all existence is impermanent) or through *wisdom* (by way of careful investigation), we are assured of streamwinning, the first step in the path to awakening *in this life itself*, that is, we would be

³⁴ You are recommended to read the full annotated version, see **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (7.2-3).

³⁵ On *sārajja* and *vesārajja*, see **Piṇḍolya Sutta** (S 22.80) @ SD 28.9a(3). On the Buddha’s 4 intrepidities, see **Mahā Sīha,nāda Sutta** (M 12.22-28/1:71 f), SD 49.1.

³⁶ On kiasu in local Chinese means “afraid of losing”: for details, see **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (7.2-3).

³⁷ D 4/1:111-126 = SD 30.5.

³⁸ See **Piṇḍolya Sutta** (S 22.80) @ SD 28.9a(3).

“incapable of dying without having attained the fruit of streamwinning.”³⁹ It is as simple as that.

This is surely the most empowering teaching, but we seem to have forgotten it, overwhelmed instead by the myth of wealth and greatness, or caught up in working under some respectable seth⁴⁰ or professional,⁴¹ or worse, fully faithful to a guru or a master, or accumulating merit to meet the future Buddha. The truth is that we have forgotten the present Buddha’s teachings in the Suttas, blinded by the false myth that they are too difficult or boring to be learned or mastered. The point is that we are letting ourselves wallow in our own defilements. We have forgotten that we are capable of heroic deeds, of self-awakening and awakening others to this fact.

THE BUDDHA’S HEROISM IS STILL WITH US. Despite the Buddha expressly reminding us immediately after his awakening and just before his

³⁹ S 25.1/3:225 & SD 16.7(1.1.3). The other 9 discourses of **Okkanti Vagga** (the Chapter on the Descent), ie, ch 25 of the Saṃyutta Nikāya are: **(Anicca) Rūpa Sutta** (S 25.2), **(Anicca) Viññāṇa Sutta** (S 25.3), **(Anicca) Phassa Sutta** (S 25.4), **(Anicca) Vedanā Sutta** (S 25.5), SD 17.3(4.5a), **(Anicca) Saññā Sutta** (S 25.6), SD 17.4(10), **(Anicca) Saṅkhāra Sutta** (S 25.7), **(Anicca) Taṇhā Sutta** (S 25.8), **(Anicca) Dhātu Sutta** (S 25.9), and **(Anicca) Khandha Sutta** (S 25.10) (S 25.1-10/3:225-229). All these suttas make a distinction between 2 types of individuals—the faith follower (*saddhā’nusārī*) and the truth-follower (*dhammānusārī*), who enter into “the certainty of rightness” (*sammatta,niyāma*), ie, the transcendent noble eightfold path, or the path of streamwinning (*sotāpatti,magga*). See also Gethin 2001:133-138.

⁴⁰ Skt *śreṣṭhī*, P *seṭṭhī*. The traditional definition of **seṭṭhi** is given in the PED as “foreman of a guild, treasurer, banker, “City man,” wealthy merchant, V 1:15 f, 271 f, 2:110 f, 157, S 1:89...etc.” *Seth* is a modern Hindi word for a wealthy entrepreneur, a successful businessman or any wealthy person of means.

⁴¹ A professional here refers esp to anyone, incl monastics, with professional qualifications, who are looked up to for their status rather than their spirituality.

14 Buddhas die if we worship them [R200]

final nirvana.⁴² that we should take only the Dharma, no one and nothing else, as our guide and refuge, many who come after him seem not to heed this vital advice. After the Buddha's death, we begin worshipping him, turning him into a deity, and making images of him, but often failing to reflect what they really stand for.

The Buddha is truly dead to us if we merely worship him. He has instructed us that the supreme worship, the best way to honour him, is to practise the Dharma "in accordance with the Dharma," that is, just as he has taught it.⁴³ It is only through realizing the Dharma to which the Buddha himself has awakened so that we would really know him, that he is really beyond life and death. For that is what nirvana is.

Many of us, especially those faith-inclined, even refuse to accept that a fully self-awakened Buddha could die (despite his numerous reminders), and so we fall into a protracted death-denial, egged on by our "perfect" guru. We imagine the Buddha is still around, perhaps in some cosmic form, able to grant us succour and success, if we perform the right rituals, fervently pray to him, or invoke his name millions of times. We have gone into the business of perpetual mourning of a teacher who is truly beyond life and death.⁴⁴

God and gods die when they are no more worshipped; *the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas die when they are worshipped.* The Buddha is a cosmic hero, who has not only blazed the trail through the jungle of ignorance to the ancient and vibrant city of Nirvana, but has left us detailed maps, clear directions, even guides, for the journey to that city. But some of us would rather carelessly doodle our fancies and frivolities on these precious maps, we make jokes of the directions, and flirt with the guides. The day comes when we realize, too

⁴² See **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (3.4.1).

⁴³ See **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (6.2.4).

⁴⁴ See **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (1.8.1).

late, that we are really stuck in our own wasteland, left behind by the wise and the noble who are well on their way to the journey's end.

The reality is that *we are meant to be heroes*—beings of effort and energy who assert themselves—to walk this path and helping others along the way.

15 Hearing voices [R201]

Like it or not, we all hear voices, and our sanity is defined by how we react to them. Some of us are fortunate enough to be diagnosed early and given prompt and effective treatment, and in due course lead normal lives. Most of us, however, are not so fortunate, as we fail to notice the gravity of our having to listen to so many voices in our heads. It only gets worse when we are untreated for such a chronic mental aberration. As a result, it is often very painful and unnecessary, when these voices rule both our waking and sleeping lives.

Most of us, that is, those with all our five physical senses intact, are burdened with five kinds of voices. We hear voices from our eyes, our ears, our nose, our tongue, and our body. When we see something, we rarely, if ever, really look at it. We know there is some form or colour before us, but we hear voices in our heads, telling us how this is the same or different from what we have seen before.

Similarly, we hear voices from our hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. Yet, we do not really listen to what is actually going on *now*, as we are mostly referring back to our past records of the present experiences. (You might just notice what your mind just told you about what you are reading here!) As a rule, such inner processes are so mechanical that we do not even know that we are merely reacting to the voices in our heads.

15 Hearing voices [R201]

Our voices also tell us what to do when we are smelling, tasting or touching something. We do not just smell; the voices tell us whether we should like it or hate it. We rarely enjoy our food: we chomp through our meals, talking on the phone, chatting with someone, reading the papers, and looking around, too. Our voices tell us to “multitask” so that we do not lose out on things, but the proper word for this is “scatter-braining.” While trying to grasp all, we actually lose all, especially our health and mind.

Since we have not really enjoyed our meal, we tend to eat more, but at the rate we eat, wolfishly and tastelessly, we become bored with our food. So our inner voices command us to go in quest of new tastes and exotic foods. Eating well is neither in the food nor in the mouth (don’t always blame the cook): good eating is in the mind. On the other hand, in the company of love, even the simplest dish tastes like ambrosia. This is called mindful eating.

Touch, as is universally acknowledged, is a touchy affair. The inner voices here are really loud and powerful. Notice how once you are able to gently touch a stray cat, she almost at once responds by purring and stroking us, too. Touch is the universal language of unconditional acceptance. Unfortunately, it is also easily misused and misunderstood, because our voices tell us to be biased and suspicious.

Our experience of touch becomes especially problematic when our inner voices put our hearts on reactive autopilot. Take social hugging for example. We might hug those we know well when we meet them, and we hug those in pain to comfort them. This is not often the case in Singapore or most Asian societies. The reason I think is the simplistic notion that touch evokes sensuality or sexuality.

This is of course true in the training of the monastics, renunciants who do not wish to convey the wrong message, or initiate socializing, that would distract them from their celibate and contemplative lives. But I’m writing with the average lay person in mind.

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The biggest problem with these inner voices is that they flood us with the past. We are so drowned in the past that we are simply dead to the present. We then fail to see people as they really are, in their natural goodness. We “see” people as our voices dictate us. We, too, present ourselves and behave in ways that our voices whisper to us as to what others expect of us. So we live a life of inner voices and whispers: we live in the past, dead to the present.

Where do these voices come from? We have noted that they are our own constructions of the past, how we see ourselves as we have lived. These are “inner” voices: they arise in our own heads. They are very ancient voices that go back to our subhuman and pre-historic past. Our bodies may have evolved; even our brains have grown bigger. But these voices can hold us down in dark subhuman levels and prevent our human growth.

They are the ancient voices that have haunted us through the ages. They are what cause fear in us, make us invent demons and gods, wage wars. These are the voices that tell us we don’t *have* this, we don’t *have* that, we must *be* this or that. They tell us to see differences in others and hate them. They are the voices of greed and of hate; they are the voices of delusion that conjure fictions in our heads and con us into believing them. They are voices that push and pull us around like puppets on a string.

Fortunately, we can over-ride these voices, even silence them forever. The first step to mastering our inner voices is to *know* and accept that they exist. They grow rampant when unattended. Treat these six voices as six little children or siblings we have. They are called Sight, Sound, Smell, Taste, Touch and Thought. That’s all they really are: children of our own minds, *objects* of our senses.

Treat them with lovingkindness: accept them just as they are, and let them go. Just as we have to let our own children grow by letting them go in due course, so too we need to free our inner voices and

15 Hearing voices [R201]

thoughts. Let them come, let them go, but never hold on to them. They are rumblings of our past, constructed, mind-made.

One of the best ways of letting go of these six kinds of voices is to anchor our mind to the breath. Hold on to the life-giving breath by simply counting “One,” after the first in-out breath. Keep counting this way up to “Ten,” and repeat this as many times as you feel good with it. You will know when to stop.

An alternative method is to simply note “In” at the end of each in-breath, and “Out” at the end of each out-breath, in the same way. Do not force your breath; keep it natural, and you will feel it becoming more peaceful.

This is in fact the best way to tame the voices in our heads. Our joyful breathing and lovingkindness will refine the inner voices so that they, too, will love and live with us. This is how we master these inner voices. If we do not master our voices, they will master us.

16 Believable fiction [R202]

“If science is fact, religion is fiction.” How far is this true, if it is true at all? In simple terms, we can say that while science is evidence-based, religion tends to be faith-based. Now let us define the terms “evidence” and “faith.” The simplest question we can ask is: What are the bases of “evidence”? We can safely say that what we call evidence must come from our five physical senses, that is to say, we have seen it, or heard it, or smelt it, or tasted it, or felt it. And there is a sixth basis of evidence, that is, the mind: how we think, or reasoning. So we have a total of six means of evidence.

While we undoubtedly depend on our six senses to know things, how can we be so sure that what we know are really what they are, that we are not making them all up? One of the most famous of western philosophers, René Descartes (1596-1650), even wondered if some demon out there were putting things into his head! Science,

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on the other hand, could be said (again on a simple level), refuses to believe in this demon, but regards our senses as being trustworthy enough, albeit humanly limited. So science must depend on ever more sophisticated instruments to measure man and the universe. As such instruments and methods of observation become better, science improves itself, correcting past inaccuracies and mistakes. In short, science, at its best, is our evolving experience of the external world.

Interestingly, now with the meeting of science and Buddhist contemplative teachings, a new world of scientific learning is opening up. Using Buddhist meditation methods and teachings, the mind scientists are now more confident and successful than they were about a century ago in charting and measuring what goes on in our minds. We are now discovering new worlds in an age of the exploration of inner space, so that we can truly call these times the Millennium of the Mind.⁴⁵

Let us return to our purpose here, that is, an examination of religion on a deeper level. Based on what we have said so far, we can venture to say that religions in general are less concerned with “evidence” as it is defined and used in science, but more with how we think. Someone or a group of people thought up some ideas (such as a creator God, the devil, good, evil, heaven, hell etc), and they decided that only they are right, and others should follow them. If we accept such a teaching or system, then we have “faith” in them. This “faith,” however, is based mostly on the ideas of others. As such, we cannot really be too sure of its truth and goodness.

Indeed, if we carefully examine what the world religions are teaching (such as a creator God, the devil, good, evil, heaven, hell etc), we must say that they are simply objects of faith, that is, they are fictional at best. Even religious people, who are serious thinkers,

⁴⁵ See **Meditation and consciousness**, SD 17.8c.

honest to themselves, know this to some extent, but lacking any better explanation, or perhaps held back by fear, find it not worth their while to speak out against them or to give them up.

Informed Buddhists, however, *enjoy* such religious fiction. We begin our Buddhist lives listening to the life of the Buddha, with all its miracles and wonders. The Buddhist teachers tell us about how karma influences the quality of our lives. We are told that while some religions speak of being “born again,” we are reborn again and again, in different worlds of humans, gods, demons, animals, ghosts, hells, and of course, heavens. We are taught that there are parallel universes, so that when this physical universe ends, we would be reborn in other universes, and so on.

Informed Buddhists, however, know fiction to be fiction, and leave it at that. It is like reading a great story-book. We need to momentarily suspend our imagination and judgement to really enjoy it. So we accept these wonderful Buddhist “fictions” for what they are, that is, as long as they infuse our lives with goodness and wisdom.

Take the teaching of karma, for example. It is a teaching of self-accountability, moral initiative and spiritual liberation. It teaches us that our conscious actions have moral worth, that we can change things if we try hard enough, and we can be truly happy if we learn to understand ourselves. Surely, this is a better fiction than belief in an all-powerful creator, on whom we depend for happiness and purpose in life. Indeed, if we care to examine destructive human behaviour, where the perpetrator thinks he has the right to dominate, hurt or destroy others, such false views are, as a rule, rooted in or encouraged by a belief in an all-powerful God.

The 22 July 2011 Norway bombing in the Regjeringskvartalet (the Government quarter), outside the prime minister’s office, in central Oslo and mass shooting of young people at camp on the island of Utøya (which killed 68 people and wounded 96), two hours later,

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were done by a single man, Anders Behring Breivik, steeped in Christian fundamentalism and a deep hatred of Muslims. Historically, this is not an isolated incident, but a pattern of violence that goes far back into ancient times. So much large-scale injustice and violence have been committed in the name of God. This devastation will continue so long as the fiction of “power embodied” continues to be taken seriously as a truth.

The “fiction” of karma, on the other hand, reminds us that we will bear the fruits of our own actions: good begets good, and evil evil. This means that we should keep to the golden rule: since we hate suffering and want happiness, other do so, too. As such, we should act in a way that is mutually beneficial.

The “fiction” of rebirth enhances the meaningfulness of karma by reminding us that our bodies may die, but our actions live on. Our consciousness will continue to act in new bodies in future lives. This means that we need to keep this world in good order and the environment healthy, because we will be coming back to what we have left behind! Surely this is a better fiction than a heaven or hell into which we are thrown by the fiat of an almighty God with whom we can negotiate with prayers and faith.

To be Buddhist, on the other hand, is to take religious fiction as it is, as long as it is useful in our personal growth and spiritual evolution, just as fairy tales and moral fables have moulded our childhood and grounded us in healthy values. But we know and take fairy tales and fables as fiction, no matter how useful they may be.

There comes a time when we need to leave the external world and its fictions aside, as it were, and look into the real “creator” of our world and the fictions we live by. We do this by patiently, attentively and compassionately examining our minds, looking into our hearts. The key to understanding our minds and hearts is our beautiful breath, the blissful stillness when we are truly at peace with our-

16 Believable fiction [R202]

selves. Only when we have truly touched this inner peace, do we realize true wisdom and liberation. Only then, is everything truly beautiful.⁴⁶

17 The greatest creator [R203]

The Straits Times of 6 August 2011 contains a number of articles that were especially troubling. The first report was titled “Boys pretend to be possessed by gods to trick girls into sex” (A3). The court heard that one of the victims, aged 14, was told by four boys that she would receive punishment from “Chinese gods” if she did not have sex with them, one of whom was only 12.

Another article read “Sect leader ‘with 79 wives’ guilty of child sexual abuse” (A5). Twenty-four of them were under 17. The jury, in San Angelo, Texas, convicted the leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints and eleven other male members of sexual assault and bigamy.

The third report was based on the 22 July 2011 bombing and mass shooting in Norway by Christian rightist Anders Behring Breivik (A37). The report writer argued that revenge (“an eye for an eye”) in such killings might be justified.⁴⁷

The fourth article, written by an Indonesian correspondent, spoke of “Books and bombs in religious schools” (C10). It reported on the difficulties that such schools faced in teaching positive values to their students so that they did not end up as religious radicals.

The common denominator in all these problems is a belief in God or gods. Why and how does the God-idea or god-belief lead to such problems? One significant explanation must surely be that such an idea has to do with “power.” Whoever speaks for God or the gods is

⁴⁶ You might like to go on to read **the Tevijja Sutta** (D 13), SD 1.8.

⁴⁷ See “Believable fiction,” R202: see no 16 above.

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likely to be taken by believers or the gullible to have divine power. The classic expression of this belief was that of the “divine rights” of kings or the “mandate of heaven” of the Chinese emperors. Such ideas were the basis for absolute monarchy. Although absolute monarchy has effectively been abolished, the psychological problems rooted in theistic ideas still haunt and harm us.

Ideas can be very powerful in influencing how we think and how we act. While it is true that a belief in some kind of divinity might inspire their believers to do good, the reverse, too, is likely to be true -- that those who are good and kind by nature are likely to believe in some kind of existence of “higher power.”

However, the healthy minded and open-hearted are more likely to be kind to others and be beneficial to society whether they believe in such a power or not. In short, belief in divinity is not always related to being good.

In fact, those who are maladjusted socially or suffer low-esteem are likely to wish or imagine that the divine is on their side, or even that they *are* divine themselves, and above the law. If we entertain a falsehood constantly enough, it soon becomes a truism, and a devastating one.

As far back as the Buddha’s time, there were powerful priests who tried to maintain their power (with which came wealth, status and pleasures) by claiming that they alone were born from God’s mouth, they held the sacred scriptures and they were the only way to God. The Buddha was amongst the most prominent opponents of such religious absolutism.

Absolutism here means that we are completely under the power of another. We ourselves have no power to succour or save ourselves, much less to help others: we are simply powerless, and need to rely on an external power: the priests and the gurus. The Buddha fully rejects such an idea.

17 The greatest creator [R203]

In simple terms, the Buddha teaches self-empowerment. We can heal ourselves and maintain our spiritual health in four stages. Firstly, we all hold some kind of belief about *the self* (the “I” behind our actions). This self decides what is good or what is bad for us without our ever knowing why, without our having any say. The self keeps us on an autopilot of reflexive motions and emotions.

Secondly, this self is false and contrived, rooted in craving, that is, a false sense of lack. We feel as if we are missing something or someone wants us to feel that we are missing something. We are like a rich man who does not know we are rich, or who does not know how to wisely use our riches, and are misguided by foolish relatives and false friends.

Thirdly, we understand and accept that the self is false and contrived. To “understand” means to have a clear vision of the situation; to “accept” means to feel that we need to make an effort ourselves to get out of the situation. It’s like we see a huge rock blocking our path. The false gurus and sin-sellers may keep pointing to the rock, and try to lead us down a side-road to some gingerbread house in a dark forest, away from our safe path. The Buddha’s teaching is like a helpful road-map warning us of dangers of the path, and showing us how to keep to the safe and right track.

Fourthly, and most importantly, we must ourselves examine the situation. Then, we will see a path around the rock. Carefully and avoiding all distractions, we go around the rock, or over the rock, if necessary. If we move on, we find ourselves back on the safe right path to freedom and salvation.

As we travel down this road to true happiness and nirvana, we see other travellers, too. Some share with us what they have (such as food, or an umbrella); others help us up when we stumble; yet others share with us kind words of their own pilgrim’s tales to inspire us on.

We, too, share what we have with others, help them up when they stumble, and share inspiring words with them. Even in the darkness of our lives, we are still safe in such numbers, as the dawn draws closer.

18 Man, the unfinished [R204]

Science and modern thinking generally regard man as a species, as an evolving member of a group. The key word here is “evolving,” that is, man (I use this word in a non-sexist way) is still unfinished, as it were. Religions, especially God-centred and book-based systems, tend to regard man as a finished product, even as “images” of the divine.

In such a religious system, man must choose his God. Often this choice entails the exclusion of everything else that is “not God” or not accepted by those who define such a God. Man, in other words, is like a glass of drink that has run over, and the liquid is all over the table. Someone (a prophet or religious teacher) tries to sweep all the spilled drink back into the glass, where it belongs, as it were.

This is a curiously absurd imagery, but it surely reflects what the God-believers often tell us: that our wisdom is mere foolishness compared to what God knows. There are the two horns of a dilemma here. If we are that foolish, surely we would make a foolish choice whether we believe or not. Or, has the choice already been made for us (fatalism); then, why bother about it at all?

As such, the scientific notion that man is still evolving, biologically and intellectually, is a better model for human learning. Early Buddhism has no problem with such a notion, except for one key point. While science generally takes this evolutionary process as being brain-based, Buddhism regards evolution as being heart-based.

Now, we need to define “evolution” and “heart” here. In early Buddhist terms, evolution is a gradual process—a spiritual evolution—

by which we discover true reality about the world and about ourselves, resulting in liberation from suffering, that is, breaking out of the cycle and chain of biological evolution.

“Heart” here means the mind; indeed, we often hear native Asian speakers using the words “heart” and “mind” as referring to the same thing. The Buddhist commentarial tradition even regards the physical heart as the seat of the mind or consciousness, just as the eye is the “seat” or sense-base for seeing, the ear for hearing, and so on.

However, while early Buddhism speaks of the five sense-bases, it is completely silent on the mind-base. The reason for this is simple enough: the mind, our consciousness, has no physical base. It is not located anywhere, not in any one place. However, for the sake of convenience, we could say that our mind is “located” all over our body, or better, our “being.” In other words, it is possible for us to extend our minds even beyond the physical body. We practise this in a positive way, for example, in our lovingkindness meditation.

When Buddhism says that we are “evolving,” it means that we are still unfinished processes. In other words, we are capable of learning, of growing wholesomely. For our present purpose, let us say that we learn in two main ways: the scientific way and the spiritual way, that is, worldly learning and Dharma learning.

Scientific or worldly learning is completely sense-based, and relates only to measurable things and processes. In simple terms, such a learning helps to create, or should create, the best, even ideal, environment for living and learning. If such a learning degrades, or worse, destroys, our environment and ecology, then it is useless and harmful knowledge, and should be avoided. Worldly learning is about a healthy body, a positive person, constituting a healthy society.

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Spiritual learning, especially Buddhist learning, is basically about the cultivation of a positive individual. The most vital part of this Buddhist learning is known as mental cultivation, that is, to know the mind, to shape it, and to free it.

We can only fully know the mind when we free it from the distractions of the physical senses. This is done by teaching the mind to give its full attention to a single mental object, especially the breath or lovingkindness. This is like discovering and extracting a raw diamond from the dirt and cleaning it up before cutting it. When the mind is patiently and lovingly able to see itself, it bursts into boundless bliss. We feel joyful, as it were, to know we have a precious diamond.

Once we are familiar with the raw diamond, we are ready to work on it, cutting and polishing it so that it can give off the brightest sparkle. Meditative bliss cleanses us of all the impurities that the physical senses have projected onto them. We must take our time to enjoy the blissful mind so that we are fully familiar with it. On emerging from this wordless bliss, we begin to realize that even this profound bliss is impermanent and mind-made—as is everything else we experience. But this is a powerfully joyful knowledge that empowers us with a meaningful and purposeful life.

The calm and clear mind gives us a vision of the true meaning of life: it is all impermanent and mind-made. The calm and clear heart inspires us with a true purpose in life: that of self-liberation. This special wisdom allows us to see more clearly into why people run around goaded on by their sense-desires, running after endless goals and short-lived pleasures.

We keep pushing this huge round boulder up the hill. On reaching the top, it runs downhill again. We follow it down and push it up all over again, and again. As long as we are at it, we seem to be enjoying it. One day, we realize that it is the nature of rocks, especially

18 Man, the unfinished [R204]

huge ones, to go downhill. Then we restfully sit on the hill-top enjoying the fresh air and great view.

In our joyful stillness on the hill-top, we might even wonder why Jack and Jill have been going up the hill, since our childhood days, to fetch a pail of water, and Jack falling downhill, breaking his crown, with Jill tumbling after. There is no water on a hill-top. The water is best found on low ground.

19 Just Be Good (or why Pascal is wrong) [R205a]

“Just be good” might sound trite or reductionist to some. However, this is exactly what the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta* (M 60) basically tells us, and in a very convincing way. *Apaṇṇaka* can be translated as “what is sure, or the sure teaching.” In short, the Buddha persuasively assures us why it is better for us to do good rather than bad.

The Buddha unreservedly rejects three wrong views common in his days and which are also prevalent today. These wrong views are:

- (1) Nihilism: that there is neither morality (goodness) nor life after death.
- (2) Amoralism: that there is neither good nor evil (it’s all right to kill, etc).
- (3) Determinism: that there are neither causes nor conditions; everything is fated.

The first wrong view is popular with the materialists who claim that this is our one and only life: so let us enjoy it to the fullest even if we have to break the law. The second view is that there is no morality: if you can get away with it, then do it. The third view is that since everything is fated or luck, there is no point making any personal effort; we might as well give up and let things be.

The Buddha says that one who accepts any of these three wrong views would see no reason to keep away from greed, hate or de-

lusion. Since this is my only life, let me get and do what I want. Since there is neither good nor evil, it's all right to desire for anything, or to hate, or to believe anything. Since all is fated, whatever happens happens, whether good or bad; so there is no point of our initiating anything.

The Buddha gives us a simple assurance: it is better to do good than do bad. Suppose we habitually do bad: if there is neither morality nor hereafter, nothing happens to us, as it were. But if there *is* morality and the hereafter – that is, rebirth or afterlife is true, then we will face negative and painful rebirth.

Suppose we habitually do bad: if there is neither good nor bad, nothing happens to us. But if there is good and bad—that is, karma is true—then we will have to face our negative and painful karmic results.

Suppose we habitually do bad: if everything is determined, nothing happens to us. But if our actions are efficacious, they have consequences, then we will suffer painful results.

On the other hand, suppose we habitually do good; that is, avoid greed, hate and delusion. If there is neither morality nor the hereafter, then nothing happens to us, as it were. But if there *is* morality and the hereafter—that is, rebirth or afterlife is true – then we will enjoy wholesome rebirth, all the same.

Let us habitually do good: if there is neither good nor bad, nothing happens to us. But if there is good and bad—that is, karma is true —then we will enjoy good karmic fruits, all the same.

Let us habitually do good: if everything is determined, nothing happens to us. But if our actions are efficacious, they have consequences, then we will enjoy positive results, all the same.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ For a detailed study, see **Apaññaka Sutta** (M 60), SD 35.5.

19 Just Be Good (or why Pascal is wrong) [R205a]

About 2000 years after the Buddha, in 1670, French philosopher Blaise Pascal, came up with this wager, a challenge, why it is more profitable to believe in God:

- If you believe in God:

If God exists, you go to heaven: your gain is infinite.

If God does not exist, your loss (because of mistaken belief) is finite.

- If you do not believe in God:

If God does not exist, your gain is finite and therefore negligible.

If God exists, your loss is infinite: your gain is zero, and you may be punished.

The basic flaws in Pascal's wager are clear, for example:

- (1) We assume that there is only one God: most religions and cultures believe that there are many Gods and gods.
- (2) All the God-religions believe there is only one God, their God. So which God should we choose?
- (3) If God is all-loving, would he not tolerate both belief and unbelief?
- (4) Who gives you the right to speak for God anyway? To resort to a wager (that is, a gamble) only shows you lack faith in such a belief.⁴⁹

An unwholesome point about such a wager is that it is a triumphalist threat. We only need to look a little closer to the Buddha's own assurance (not a wager) that it is better to do good. Please study the Buddha's gentle assurance and think for yourself. If you still cannot see the assurance, look at it again in the years ahead. The Buddha calls it an assurance for a very good reason: you are assured of true happiness here and now.

⁴⁹ For a detailed study, see **Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65), SD 35.4a.

20 Keep what you cannot lose [R205b]

Renowned social psychologist and humanist philosopher, Erich Fromm (1900-1980), writes in his book, *To Have or To Be*, “If I am what I have, and if I lose what I have, then what am I?” Nobody, Fromm answers, but a defeated, deflated, pathetic testimony to a wrong way of living (1976:89).

“To have” almost always is related to something external to us. We might say: I have a family, friends, books, a car, money, and so on. We can also “have” beauty, fame, power, greed, hate, delusion, and other intangibles. In this latter case, there is a sense that these qualities are not really “us,” even though we can say “I *am* beautiful, famous, powerful, greedy, hateful, deluded...” There is a pervading sense of impermanence about them.

When we say we “have” something, at least two important implications immediately arise. It is not really a part of us. We might “have” them but they *are* not really “us.” We might try to identify with them, but we would be at odds with them sooner or later. We are capable of losing what we have, as it is not really an integral part of our being (like “I *am* truly happy”). Most importantly, we can only *enjoy* what we have – it brings us true joy – when we use it in a wholesome way. In this sense, we can only “own” what we enjoy. The point is that we can only “be” something or “use” something.

We came with nothing into this world; we take nothing with us when we depart. That is as far as “things” go. In other words, we do not really have any true power over what we have. Buddhism teaches us to look deeper into what it means to “have” and to “be.” Let us now free these words from the pages and see them with our hearts.

The Buddha teaches us to *give away what we cannot keep* so that *we become what we really are*. This may sound like a wordplay, but

20 Keep what you cannot lose [R205b]

let us take these letters and words to be musical notes and phrases, and simply feel them. Early Buddhism is a teaching about wholesome feelings: being happy is a feeling; so is love.

What is it that we cannot keep? What is that we do not have until we give it away? It is love. We can only be loved when we love others. Love is not love until we give it away. To love another is to unconditionally accept that person or being. Friendship begins when we unconditionally accept this other person or being, but we do not stop there.

Love is not love unless you show it. We best show love by first feeling it in our hearts. Then we are able to show or say this love to another.

What is “love”? There are animal love, human love and divine love. Animal love is merely the desire for things, such as the physical body. But the body changes and decays, and our desire soon turns into disgust. Animal love is grasping and collecting with almost no giving. It is exploitative (seeing others as objects) and, hence, it is not healthy.

Human love, on a simple level is friendly love, a desire and willingness to communicate and learn with others in a positive manner. Human love inspires us to share what we have and to give to others. By patiently listening to others, we allow them to see themselves more fully and joyfully: this is the gift of time. By comforting others we remove their fears: this is the gift of fearlessness.

Divine love is an ability and willingness to see goodness in others and bring about mutual and active joy. Divine love is more than merely giving what we *have*: we give others what we *are*. Being happy, we wish others well and happy, too. It begins with a single thought. Being compassionate, we reach out to the less fortunate. We show kindness to others even when they do not deserve it.

SIMPLE JOYS 3: Loving words

Being appreciative, we joyfully celebrate the fortunes and goodness of others.

Being equanimous, we see success and failure as the sides of the same coin: so too praise and blame; fame and obscurity. We see joy and sorrow as defining one another.

We live with lovingkindness, compassion, and gladness, but there are still those whose hearts remain untouched and unmoved. For the moment, let us accept things as they are, as we have done our best. So we calmly await new opportunities for showing love.

Just as we are touched and moved by the kindness and love of others, they too would sooner or later be similarly moved. Plant the seeds of love and water them with virtue and patience.

Love is something we can neither have nor own because it is an active appreciation of self and other. In time, we begin to see others as being no different from us, and the self-and-other wall is broken down.

When we show love, we are giving what we are. If we want to be loved, we must first show that love. When we feel love in this way, we have something we cannot lose. We will never lose the memory and power of such a joy. Those we love are impermanent and subject to change; they might even leave us forever one day. But our happiness about them remains forever with us.

Give what we cannot keep; get what we cannot lose. This is the beginning of Buddhist living and practice.

21a Awakening moments [R206]

- 1 Awaken! The dawn is almost come
Open your eyes, the light is all around
Look, you will see yourself in others
Love, give what is not yours to keep

21a Awakening moments [R206]

- 2 A bee drinks a flower's taste, sharingly
A bird flies freely in the sky, trackless
Its shadow touches the water, rippleless
Fill your life with spacious breath, selflessly
- 3 There is no present like this very moment
Free your thought, slave not after the past
Be not a future robot: the future never comes
There is no moment like this here and now
- 4 Peak experience? What goes up, goes down
Success? You must have known failure
Wealth? To have is not always to be
Reputation? Do you even know yourself?
- 5 See yourself as you would see others
Be truly kind to those who do not deserve it
Smile at the joy of others, it's easy really
You have done your best, it will all pass
- 6 Seek outside, you will find what you are looking for
Grasp something, your hand takes its shape
Let it go, you'll be more than what you ever have
Seek within, see the truth that's waiting for you
- 7 Time runs out if you run after it
Time stands still if you breathe rightly
Time grows if you love the moment
Time-free, when all is done and over
- 8 Those who talk a lot must have failed in everything else
If you listen only to them, you will lose even more
Gentle silence makes true music of what we hear
Inner stillness is the canvas for breathless beauty

SIMPLE JOYS 3: Loving words

This poem was inspired after my reading of Stephen and Martine Batchelor's picture poem, "Lazy Little Guide to Enlightenment," and from which I have taken a couple of lines.

The first verse is about interbeing, how all things are related in a conditioned manner, so that we only need to look at how interconnected we all are and to rejoice in this. This is the beginning of self-knowing.

Verse 2 is based on Dhammapada 62 and 93. The idea here is that of being in harmony with everything around us, not exploiting anything. When we are at peace with everything around us, it is easier to be at peace within.

Verse 3 is a reminder of our life's precious moments, that is, a life well lived. This echoes the wisdom of the Bhaddekaratta Suttas (M 131-134).

The first line of verse 4 is an insightful line taken from the Batchelors. Building on it is a reflection on how we should view things of the world. We need to differentiate between worldly conditions and true happiness.

Verse 5 flows from verse 4, reminding us how we are intimately interconnected with others in the world. It is a reflection on the four divine abodes: lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity.

Verse 6 is a reflection of inner renunciation. The world outside is what we make of it, projections of our minds. When we understand better how we think and feel, we know the external world better. The second line is probably from one of the Upanishads.

Verse 7 speaks on how we view time and our priorities in life. We tend to have time for people and things we like more than others. But do we work towards what is really good for us?

21a Awakening moments [R206]

Verse 8 is a humorous take on success gurus who try to sell their images to others. Often we have to pay hefty sums only to learn that their essential teachings are actually elaborated in Buddhism. The best way to true success is to know our own hearts. Then there are those who love quoting famous and not-so-famous quotes online and offline. They are truly precious friends if they actually practise the wholesome virtues that they quote.

The poem is very much more than all this. These are only brief notes, partly to credit my sources of inspiration, and also to encourage you to feel the poem for yourself, and perhaps discover some wonderful things about yourself.

21b Aufrüttelnde Momente

von Piya Tan

Erwache! Die Morgendämmerung ist fast herangebrochen
Öffne deine Augen, das Licht ist überall
Schau – und du wirst dich in anderen sehen
Liebe – gib was nicht deines ist zu behalten 1

Eine Biene labt sich am Geschmack der Blume – teilend
Ein Vogel fliegt frei am Himmel – ohne Spuren
Sein Schatten berührt das Wasser – ohne Kräusel
Fülle dein Leben mit weitem, tiefem Atem – ohne Selbst 2

Es gibt keine [andere] Gegenwärtigkeit außer diesen Moment
Befreie deine Gedanken, plage dich nicht mit der Vergangenheit
Sei kein Roboter der Zukunft: die Zukunft ist jetzt
Es gibt keinen [anderen] Moment außer diese Gegenwärtigkeit 3

Ein Gipfelerlebnis? Was emporsteigt, fällt [wieder]
Erfolg? Du mußt [doch] das Versagen [bereits] kennengelernt haben
Reichtum? Zu haben bedeutet nicht immer zu sein
Ruf? Kennst du dich überhaupt selbst? 4

SIMPLE JOYS 3: Loving words

- Sieh dich selbst so wie du andere gerne sehen würdest
Sei wahrhaftig freundlich zu denen, die es nicht verdienen
Lächle der Freude anderer zu, es ist wirklich [so] einfach
Du hast dein Bestes gegeben – es wird alles vorübergehen 5
- Suche im Außen, und du wirst finden was du suchst
Ergreife etwas, und deine Hand nimmt dessen Form an
Lass es los, und du wirst sein, mehr als was du je zu besitzen vermagst
Suche im Innern – sieh die Wahrheit, die auf dich wartet 6
- Die Zeit läuft davon, wenn du ihr hinterher rennst
Die Zeit steht, wenn du richtig atmest
Die Zeit wächst, wenn du den Moment liebst
Frei von Zeit, wenn alles getan und vorbei ist 7
- Jene, die viel reden, müssen wohl in allem anderen versagt haben
Wenn du nur auf sie hörst, wirst du noch mehr verlieren
Sanfte Stille bringt aus dem was wir hören wahre Musik hervor
Innere Stille ist die Leinwand für atemlose Schönheit 8

Anmerkungen des Autors:

Nachdem ich das Bilder-Gedicht „Ein fauler, kleiner Leitfaden zur Erleuchtung“ von Martine und Stephen Batchelor's gelesen hatte, wurde ich dadurch zu meinem Gedicht inspiriert. Aus dem ihren habe ich auch ein paar Zeilen übernommen.

Die erste Strophe handelt vom Intersein, davon wie alles in einer bedingten Weise miteinander verbunden ist, so dass wir nur schauen brauchen, wie wir alle miteinander verbunden sind und uns daran erfreuen können. Das ist der Anfang der Selbst-Erkenntnis.

Strophe 2 basiert auf den Strophen 62 und 93 des Dhammapada. Die Idee hier ist, mit allem was uns umgibt in Harmonie zu sein, und nichts [und niemanden] auszunutzen. Wenn wir mit allem um uns herum in Frieden sind, ist es einfacher auch in uns in Frieden zu sein.

21b Aufrüttelnde Momente

Die Strophe 3 dient als Erinnerung an die kostbaren Augenblicke in unserem Leben, welche ein gut geführtes Leben bedeuten. Dies gibt auch die Weisheit des Bhaddekaratta Suttas (M 131-134) wieder.

Die erste Zeile der 4. Strophe ist eine voller Einsicht, welche ich von den Batchelors übernommen habe. Darauf aufbauend folgt eine Betrachtung, wie wir die Dinge der Welt sehen sollten. Wir müssen weltliche Bedingungen und wahres Glück voneinander unterscheiden.

Strophe 5 geht aus der vierten hervor, und erinnert uns daran wie innig wir mit anderen in der Welt verbunden sind. Es ist eine Betrachtung der vier göttlichen Verweilungen: liebende Güte, Mitgefühl, wertschätzende Freude und Gleichmut.

Die 6. Strophe ist eine Betrachtung [eine Schau] innerer Entsagung. Die äußere Welt ist das was wir aus ihr machen, Projektionen unseres Geistes. Wenn wir zu einem besseren Verständnis davon kommen, wie wir denken und fühlen, verstehen wir [auch] die äußere Welt [etwas] besser. Die zweite Zeile ist wahrscheinlich aus einem der Upanishaden.

Strophe 7 spricht davon, wie wir die Zeit und unsere Prioritäten in unserem Leben sehen. Wir tendieren dazu, Zeit für Menschen und Dinge zu haben, die wir mehr als andere/anderes mögen. Aber bemühen wir uns auch darum, was wirklich gut für uns ist?

Strophe 8 ist eine humorvolle Anspielung an die [sogenannten] Erfolgsgurus, die versuchen ihr Image an andere zu verkaufen. Oft genug müssen wir dafür große Summen bezahlen, nur um ihre essentiellen Lehren zu erlernen, welche tatsächlich der Buddhismus hervorgebracht hat. Der beste Weg zu wahren Erfolg ist der, sein eigenes Herz kennenzulernen.

[Aber] das Gedicht ist viel mehr als [nur] das. Dies sind nur kurze Anmerkungen, zum einen nur um meine Quelle der Inspiration zu würdigen, aber auch um dich zu ermutigen, das Gedicht für dich selbst zu erfühlen, um dadurch vielleicht ein paar wunderbare Dinge über dich zu entdecken.

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22 Write words [R207]

What George Orwell writes in his essay, “Why I Write,” must surely strike a harmonious chord with those who love writing and believe in humanity,

“My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art’. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience.” (1946)

Writing, in its own way, is more permanent than talking, which is usually impromptu, and, as such, does not really engage us to the fullest of our knowledge and ability to think and feel. Moreover, talking means talking with another or others, that is, we need to be interactive, if we are ever to keep the friends at all. Often, our listeners are our immediate critics and censors, which means we never really get to fully say our piece.

Then again, to hold our peace is not helpful, except in meditation. To be able to write something that brings both the writer and the reader some inner peace is surely one of the greatest gifts and joys of writing—and of the Dharma. Yet, to say this is to acknowledge that there are some things, even many things, that disturb our peace and blur our vision.

The most difficult thing to write about is religious matters. The reason is simple: everybody has an opinion or feeling about religion, whether they know it or not. Even within the same religion, there are dissenting voices. An unconditional goodness of Buddhism is that it allows the most latitude amongst its followers. There are at least two reasons for this: a simple one and a complex one.

22 Write words [R207]

The simple reason for the Buddhist tolerance of differing opinions and dissent is because we all have views. It is like looking at the same mountain, but each of us is standing on a different side. We are each talking about our “view” of that same mountain, and yet we are saying different things about it. We have to allow space here for others because all of us are right: we are speaking from our personal experience. Yet, we are all wrong, too, because we are not speaking of the whole mountain: if we ever could that is.

Perhaps it is best we all climb the mountain, reach its peak, and silently enjoy the breath-taking view from the top. And then smile at each other for having scaled the heights to be on top of things. There is nothing more to debate or quarrel over.

If we do write clearly and accurately (as far as possible) with a passion about things that matter to us, this becomes a useful testimony for posterity. Truly enriched are our lives, when in our readings, we are able to look into the minds and hearts of our forebears who have written with clarity, accuracy and wisdom. These are like signs and markers left behind by great and kind travellers on our trail through this jungle called life.

As Buddhists, the best trail for us is the Pali highway of early Buddhism, which is direct and clear. Some, however, might prefer the numerous side-shows, noisy festivals, and colourful events that cultural Buddhisms have to offer. So we linger on as the captive audiences of some sweet theatrics of the Big Screen and the exciting magical illusions of the Diamond Stage.

When the diversions are over, all seen and done, we realize that it's all smoke, mirrors, bells, incense, and robes. We must move on. We need to hit the safe and straight highway again. For many of us, we may have to go back to reading the travel brochures again, so that we know better how to choose our destination and mode of travel. We need to go back to the Buddha Dharma.

What if we do not like writing, or often feel at a loss for words? Using the wrong words or figures, or writing something hazily, can be as bad as not writing, or worse. Even then, we could still just read on: what is a writer without readers, who are the vital majority? Reading, especially enjoyable reading, is the art of allowing ourselves to learn how to live well and more fully.

A good book would fully absorb us, to be one with our reading. A better reading is one where, having read, we are so overwhelmed with a sense of our self and other melding into a blissful oneness, that we are joyfully, smilingly, at a loss for words. The best reading is one that turns us fully inwards into our own goodness. It is such a blissful goodness that we have no need for anything else, that is, for as long as our hearts are still.

And when we emerge from that enlivening bliss, we might feel a burst of urgency as to why others have not tasted such sublime and joyful freedom, too. So we are compelled to act, to write, so as to awaken the goodness in others, too.

23 True individual [R208]

Truth and beauty are the pillars of spiritual friendship, the gladness and love between and amongst true individuals, and the mentorship of a meditation guide for one on the inner journey. Spiritual friendship is the quest for *truth*, an understanding of true reality and also a full taste of it.⁵⁰ Such an experience is a celebration of true *beauty*, the peak of feeling.⁵¹

Although we might accidentally bump into the face of truth in a moment of excruciating darkness, or by chance run into the arms of beauty in a fleeting rapturous break, these liberating moments are

⁵⁰ On spiritual friendship, see SD 34.1.

⁵¹ On feeling, see **Vedanā**, SD 17.3.

23 True individual [R208]

soon forgotten, drowned in the clutter of our daily grind, or they merely twinkle like a distant star in the night skies of our memories. The point is that we need to cultivate our minds in wise attention so that it is prepared for the dawn of truth and beauty.

The first step towards becoming a true individual is the ability and willingness to renounce *our body*, that is, to unplug, to silence, at least momentarily, the ringing phones that are our eye, ear, nose, tongue and body, so that we can fully focus only on the mind, our interminably busy memory factory and construction site of private realities.

This mind has been the source of discontent and trouble ever since we learned to think. It is not that thinking is bad, but like a sharp knife, it can cut us painfully if we do not use it properly. Yet wisely used, it becomes a flaming sword of wisdom, a super-laser, that cuts down all thoughts.

When we have internally levelled off all our thoughts, we feel a deep sense of relief and satisfaction, as if a huge burden has been lifted from us. We feel like Sisyphus of Greek mythology freed of his samsaric rock-pushing, sitting at leisure on the hilltop, surveying the heavens.⁵² We feel ecstatic because we have thoroughly sloughed off all that otherness, what is not us, not ours, pushed upon us by others, accreted upon us through our physical senses. We are finally free from what others think, say or do that affect us; we are free from having to measure ourselves against others—at least momentarily—but this moment feels like eternity and is well worth it.

What are we left with when we have renounced all our thoughts? We are free from *knowing* (as we understand it). We are free from the knowing that is dependent on *thoughts*, which are in turn dependent on *words*. But, the word is not the thing; the name is not

⁵² On the myth of Sisyphus, see **Yodh'ājīva Sutta** (S 42.3), SD 23.3 Intro.

the thing named⁵³—in fact, there is really no thing and nothing to name.⁵⁴ We seem to simply need to name names, and all that we can know are but words, words, words, and names, names, names. But our spellings are often different or unclear, and so we often disagree and wrangle.

Once the forest of thoughts is cleared, we are left with the spreading shady tree of feeling. We now truly know what joy is, what pain is, what boredom is. We are able to rise above them on account of the joy of mirror-like equanimity, the wordless bliss, now that all our tasks are done and nothing more to do. We feel spacious as the heavens, and still as space itself. We have returned to our true home, as it were.

When, from this senseless respite, we return to the world of the senses, we at first find it to be an insane noisy clutter, but we quickly attune ourselves to be in harmony with everything, accepting them unconditionally. For, that is the way things are at the sensible level. We are *in* the world, but no more *of* the world. We are healthy amongst the sick; we are untroubled amongst the troubled⁵⁵—we are in a better position to help others.

Source: Mahā Sudassana Sutta (D 17) @ SD 36.12 (6.6.2.4).

24 Don't tell me [R209]

Religion is best served unheard, in blissful inner silence. Unless you have a stomach strong enough not to believe everything you hear or read. Or, a heart humbly wise enough to respect others.

One of the most terrifying experiences we can have, as sane people, is to hear a glassy-eyed evangelist tell us how true his God is, and

⁵³ See **Mahā Sudassana Sutta** (D 17), SD 36.12 (6.3).

⁵⁴ Further, see **Saṅkhāra**, SD 17.6.

⁵⁵ Dh 29; A 6.10.5/3:286 f, SD 15.3.

24 Don't tell me [R209]

why we should listen and follow him. When we try to have a simple dialogue, we find that we are talking with an absent wall of pre-recorded gibberish.

The best response when approached by an evangelist is never to engage him. This is just what he wants. He probably senses that our pride is our weakness, and he is going to use it. Once we reply him in any way, his fangs are sunk into us. The more we speak, the more the blood of sanity and humanity is sucked out from us.

Never be tempted by the notion that we have the wisdom to convince him. It is not that we lack the wisdom, but it is giving what is sacred to the dogs. If, by any chance, we speak a truth clearly, he would only change tack, and turn to another topic, leaving us at a loss (again).

Silence is the best defence to those who have no ears to really hear us. It is best for us to make an immediate return to humanity and those whom we love.

Most zealous evangelists I have known are those who were darkly moved by an adolescent impulse to prove themselves by our "converting" to their way of thinking. But as they mellowed over the years, and they always did, many of them became more realistic and friendly. They even recanted their past domineering ways.

Religious truth and salvation are not won through persuasion or debate. We each need to taste their sweetness or bitterness for ourselves. Whether or not there is some divine will, we must move on with our own hearts, rightly or wrongly. We all have the capacity to learn and to change. And we must be willing to learn and change.

The most liberating realizations are not heard in the din of religious preaching and selling, but in the heart's stillness, a true clarity that is capable of revealing everything to us, if we really care to look long enough.

SIMPLE JOYS 3: Loving words

The truest faith is that which teaches us to calm our hearts and pride. If we are truly silent and still enough, then we can but see what eyes see not, nor ears hear. It is a blissful peace that embraces all. Yet, all this makes no sense, unless we have been truly silent ourselves. (The point is that we need to stop sensing for a moment, and just feel.)

Sweet flowers, ancient trees, gurgling streams and mountain mist may not speak to us in our language, but it is so easy to feel their peace without any cost. Even memories of these flowers, trees, streams and mountain mist evoke peace within us.

One of the most vital freedoms we must preserve for ourselves is the freedom of not knowing, especially when this not-knowing makes us more peaceful, happier, kinder and more creative people.

If all this sounds somewhat abstract, perhaps, this thoughtful little prose poem by **Annie Dillard** (b 1945), US Pulitzer Prize writer, best known for her narrative non-fiction, makes very good sense:

Somewhere, and I can't find where,
I read about an Eskimo hunter who asked
the local missionary priest,
"If I didn't know about God and sin, would I go to hell?"
"No," said the priest, "not if you did not know."
"Then why," asked the Eskimo earnestly, "did you tell me?"
Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974:123)

25 Revolution! [R210]

Human history has seen at least four great revolutions that have effectively shaped how we live today. These four are the Glorious Revolution (1688), the French Revolution (1789), the Chinese Revolution (1911) and the Russian Revolution (1917). As a result of the Glorious Revolution (England), the theory of the divine right of kings (the ideology that the king's power comes from God and as such is

25 Revolution! [R210]

not subject to the people's will) was abandoned. The American and the French revolutions further weakened the theory's appeal. The Russian Revolution destroyed the Tsar's autocracy and led to the formation of the Soviet Union. The Chinese Revolution marked the end of the imperial power and the birth of the Chinese Republic (1949).

All these revolutions were basically political. They involved shifts of power from one ruling group to another. They were all external events, united by the idea of popular liberation. These revolutions also significantly weakened another power that was closely connected with the country's ruling elites: Christianity. Having lost much of its political power base, Christianity today must employ other means of winning converts. However, its language of power and domination still openly hints at its political religiosity and using love to conquer all.

As Buddhists, we regard the Buddha's teachings (6th century BCE) as constituting the most significant religious revolution in human history. Unlike the other revolutions, this is an internal one, directed at individual change and liberation, the early Buddhist teachings liberated us from the God-idea itself.

The Buddha, simply put, refuses to accept an idea where we can claim to put all the power in the universe into one name, and then we use that essentialist hammer to knock down whatever we fear or whomever differs from us. World wars and widespread violence occur because we fancy that we have the right to dominate and exploit others, "for God and our right."

The God-idea is a most dangerous weapon in the heads and hands of those who have little idea of what ideas can do. The greatest wonder of God is that he has really done nothing at all, and yet this universe and we exist. Nothing needs to be said of God, nothing *can* be said of anything we imagine being bigger than everything else.

SIMPLE JOYS 3: Loving words

If we try, then we have politicized religion. For, we are talking about the power, wittingly or unwittingly, to dominate others. We have been dominating nature, and the costs are rising even now all over the not-so-good earth.

We are working on the wrong nature. We are working on external nature, when the real work is with the nature within. No revolution out there can bring meaningful, even lasting, progress, wealth, happiness or peace. All this can only truly come from within: it must be a mental revolution. As it has to do with the mind, we must do it ourselves. No one else can or must do this for us.

The revolution of our own mind is the most significant of all revolutions. Without a free mind, we will always be enslaved by our own ideas and those who seem to share the same ideas. These same ideas are those rooted in greed, hate, delusion and fear. These are the strongest chains of all, because it is very difficult for us to see them, because we would rather not see them: this is called "belief."

The chains of greed enslave us to the idea that we never have enough, and to keep on wanting. They cheat us into believing in *having* rather than in *being*. We might *have* things, but to *be* really happy is another thing. As such, we are in reality always poor no matter how much we have!

The chains of hate enslave us to tribes of narrow beliefs that seek and punish differences. They demand sameness in views and actions, taking these as the strength of the tribe so that it prevails above all others. Hate alienates humans by race, religion, class, sex, wealth and the measuring of others in terms of our own biases.

The chains of delusion enslave us with ideas that insidiously remove our confidence in self-worth, self-reliance, self-empowerment, and self-liberation. So we run to power-figures, father-figures and religious figures for approval. Our existence becomes dependent on others. Since this is a one-way dependence, there is no interbeing.

25 Revolution! [R210]

Delusion tricks us into thinking that our *internal* problems (ignorance, craving and suffering) can be solved by *external* means.

Delusion tricks us into worshipping Buddhas in our own images instead of living the Dharma, the path to true reality. It deludes us into thinking that the noise of prayers are more efficacious than stilling our own hearts, whence all our problems arise. We simply need to stop for a while and see the truth of impermanence within us and all around.

The chains of fear grip us with a sense of guilt at the idea that we are weak and never good enough to work for our own salvation. We are so belittled by delusion and fear that we project respect and power onto appearances. We mistake looks for reality, without examining the reality that this veneer hides. We religiously presume that clothes make the man, that robes make the monk, without carefully studying the wearer's moral virtue and wisdom.

The God-idea is about crowds and crowd-control. It is the holding centre of political crowds and religious gatherings. This centre is the image of a power perceived as bigger than us. True happiness, on the other hand, is about spaciousness, just as heaven is a happy space; just as we need space for growth. But for growth to thrive, there must also be stimulation, and active responses to such stimulations. This is called suffering, the beginning of wise faith.

This taste of suffering is not about pain, but a vision that there is something vital missing from our lives. The missing pieces are neither found outside of us, nor in beliefs (that we can find answers without ever trying). Indeed, when we think in terms of pieces, we would feel that bits are missing. We must stop thinking for a while, so that we can feel: see life right in the eye of the moment. And there, we see only one enduring reality: *change*. This is the vision that begins our inner revolution.

The internal revolution begins with our constantly reflecting that health is the greatest of profits, especially mental health (it is immeasurable); that contentment is the greatest wealth: how little or how much we have depends on how we think or measure; we may have things, but we can never own them; that those who are honest to us are our truest friends, closer than relatives; and that the highest peace is a mind free from greed, hate, delusion and fear.

26 I think I know [R211]

To say that knowing or knowledge is enough for salvation, even a happy life, is like hearing someone tell us that eating raw hot chili will cure our headache and we act on this information; or we read the label on a bottle that says “water,” but unknown to us, it is really kerosene, and we drink it anyway, with dangerous consequences. These are two simple examples of blind faith.

No matter how much faith or belief we put in the chili peppers or in our informant, it does not change the fact that our headache remains or even worsens. No matter how much faith we have in the label, in its beautiful clear print, kerosene is still not healthy, not even palatable, for us. If we persist in putting faith in the sad mis-saying, “believe that I may understand,” then we will sooner or later have to face its sad and painful consequences, and also harm many others along the way.

Knowledge is like a knife. The fact that we know that it is a knife is not enough. It might not be sharp enough to cut anything, or it breaks as soon as we use it. Even if we have a good knife (as far as knives go), we must know *how* to use it. Otherwise, we will not make very nice cuts of things, or worse, we will cut and hurt ourselves. When we know that this is a knife, and we know how to use it, and when not to use it, and how to keep it safely, then we have more than knowledge—we have wisdom.

In Buddhist training, knowledge begins with knowing ourselves, that we are nothing more than our six senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking. We *have* eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, but they do not work in themselves. Here, it makes sense to say that we are not what we *have*, but we are what we *do*. We see things, and we try to make sense of them. Similarly, we try to make sense of what we hear, smell, taste, touch, and think. That is why, in an important way, they are called “the senses.”

Wisdom means firstly, understanding that nothing really happens with only one cause: whatever happens arises from many causes and effects. This is called conditionality. As such, it is meaningless to “blame” anyone or anything. Suffering arises as a result of conditions. If we understand the conditions, we can lessen or even avoid or prevent the suffering. This is not always easy, but wisdom arises when we take our sufferings as lessons not yet learned.

From experience or wisdom, we know that our senses are not always right. Often enough, we sense things the wrong way. More often than not, we make the wrong sense of things, and we do not even realize this for a long time. Worse than this is when we refuse to see things in any other way. This is called blind faith.

Blind faith, in the extreme, is like driving a car at high speed on a dark highway, unable to see the road, but thinking that we would reach our destination. If we are foolish enough to do so, we would certainly never reach home. We might even harm or kill someone else or ourselves. Blind faith, no matter how fervent, as such, can be highly dangerous.

If we speak of blind faith, then we can also speak of “wise faith.” In simple terms, blind faith is “I believe that I may understand,” while wise faith is “Let me understand that I may believe.” The difference is very clear and it is vital to know this. In the former case, I simply

accept *as true and real* what I experience (from what I sense) or what I hear as true and real.

Here, we need to examine the two key words: “real” and “true.” Without going into philosophical details, we can say that something is real if we have sensed or experienced it for ourselves. An easy example is when we touch a blazing fire, we would *really* burn ourselves. A trickier example is that of seeing a mirage; we *do* see an oasis in the hot desert air: the image is real because we can see it. But it is not true. Or, we might say, it is *virtual* reality. Religious teachings are very often virtual realities, if not wishful imaginations.

Indeed, much, if not most, of our thinking and views are projections of virtual reality, too. We often experience things and view others the way we have been conditioned to. We rarely see the present, but we virtually dress it in our past. As such, our lives seem to be little more than a present tragic comedy on the stage of our past.

If we see our lives as a warehouse of uncompleted projects, we exist merely looking for stops to fill those gaps. External stops can never fill internal gaps. They are worlds apart, and there is no God in the gaps.

The truth is *not* out there. The “truths” out there are but blinding rays of light that pierce through the holes of the walls of our hollowness, conjuring strange forms and figures in the darkness within. We are hollow beings full of holes trying to plug them with whatever we can believe. The point is there’s no real help from the outside.

We need to welcome ourselves into our own world, merge into our inner space and set things right there. Even the first blush of our efforts in touching our inner space is liberating. For a moment, we might even see the boundless space within. We should keep our heart right where it is. Let no one steal it, for we would be heartless then.

26 I think I know [R211]

The world out there is the most insidious of evangelists, incessantly trying to gorgonize us into its own image, turning us into stone images of blind belief. The best way to treat any evangelist is to look the other way.

If we only love God, we can never truly love mankind, or any living being, for that matter. Man has named God, but he is not a person not even a thing. Perhaps, we could think of God as spirit. In other words, there is *no* God, only godliness.

We cannot experience God, just as we cannot experience John or Ah Beng. The Buddha teaches us godliness here and now. We can feel godliness by cultivating unconditional love, compassion, gladness, and equanimity. Unconditional love begins with our accepting ourselves just as we are, and to do the same for others. Compassion is to be kind to others even when they do not deserve it. Gladness is being happy at the happiness of others. Equanimity is the still mind that reflects the world just as it is: it is the peace of having sown the seeds and letting the plants grow and flower.

The purpose of life, then, is not merely to know. For, knowledge is not the end, but only the means for full living. When knowledge is *valued for itself*, it becomes blind faith, a view, a fetter preventing growth and freedom. When we begin to understand *how we know*, then we see only mental constructs. We can only transcend knowing when we have learned to truly feel, that is, touch the spacious stillness within.

27 When nobody seems to care [R212]

The body is limited to only four postures (standing, walking, sitting, and lying down), and cannot remain too long in any one posture. So long as we change our postures constantly or whenever necessary, we would find it tolerable or are unlikely to notice any

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discomfort. However, if we have *mental* suffering, if we are *unhappy*, then our bodies, too, would in some way be affected.

Then we need to “isolate” the suffering, as it were, to define it for what it really is, and not make it bigger than it really is. Identify the causes and effects, the conditionality behind the suffering, and the feelings that arise for it. *What* are these feelings? *How* do they behave? Notice how they rise and fall, come and go.

A healthy mind is able to withstand physical discomfort or pain to a considerable extent. If there is no wound in our hand, we might safely carry even poison in it (Dh 124). A weak or negative mind, on the other hand, would find it difficult to do so, and might even worsen it with negative thoughts.

While pain and other difficulties may be unavoidable, suffering is optional. In other words, it might be difficult to prevent or end physical pain, or conflicts with others, but we can prevent or end mental suffering with proper mind-training (especially meditation and mindfulness). In short, we create our own sufferings, and as such we can remove them ourselves.

A negative thought is destructive because it looks at what it *cannot* do, rather than what it *can* do. A negative thought tends to attract more negative ones, and creates new negative thoughts. In time, we are crushed by the weight of all these mind-made negativity. In other words, we must be careful when we allow our minds to wander. The point is that we have the power to pull the mind back before it self-destructs, as it were.

As we move through the world with lovingkindness, we are likely to see more suffering than others. Our compassion moves us to identify with the sufferings we see. This is what the Bodhisattva prince Siddhattha sees in the first three sights which leads him to renounce the world. This is what should move us to help others, and to better ourselves in the process.

27 When nobody seems to care [R212]

The more compassionate we are, the more we feel for the world. To be kind-hearted is like being a lightning rod always up there, and whenever there is a storm, lightning would hit the rod. The rod does not complain, but safely drains all that powerful electricity into the ground. We must learn to do this, too.

We must always remember that the world out there will always be the way it is, since time immemorial. In the past, people have hurt one another, wars have devastated us; famines have diminished us. Today, too, this is happening; and it will happen again and again in the future.

Let us for a moment imagine we are doctors who see sick people everyday: we heal them, but they keep on coming. There is no end to the number of the sick. Yet, we do not give up, because every life counts.

A boy was walking along a river one day, and a truck carrying fresh-water fish skidded off the road and the fishes spilled onto the ground, jumping about hopelessly. The driver was unhurt but dazed. The thoughtful boy at once ran about and carefully took the fishes one by one and let them into the river. He kept on doing this.

A man comes along, stands with folded arms, and scolds him. "You stupid boy! How many fishes can you save?" The boy at once replies, "If you were this fish, it would matter a lot. At least, this one is saved!"

We may not be able to save the world. Indeed, we never can. For, the world was yesterday, is today, and will be tomorrow. As we go through life, we meet other travellers. When they are tired, we help them along. We rest with them and try to comfort them. If they are hungry, we try to share what little we have when they have nothing. If they are lost, we patiently show them the way.

Sometimes we hear travellers' tales, some happy, some sad. Sometimes we hear the same story but told in conflicting ways. The tellers do not seem to be lying. They are simply telling it the way they feel and see things. But we are not them. We too feel and see things differently. So we tell the same story our way, but we tell it in a way that would put a smile on their faces, and fire in their hearts. And then, we too must move on.

It's all right to journey on at our own pace, even slowly. We might even falter and fall back sometimes. Stop, if we must, but not too long; for, then we might forget about the journey. Every step we take, we are nearer our destination.

There is only one way to help others, that is, to do it, despite everything. We are never perfect at the start, but as we age, we become better at it. That is, if we are willing to learn from mistakes. We best learn from mistakes by not being afraid to have made them, but more courageous to correct them.

To be kind to others is to empower them. The greatest empowerment is to give others the confidence that they are truly good deep inside, and that they are able to work things out for themselves if they really try. One of the best things that we can really say to ourselves in the evening of our lives is that we have really learned a lot about life, and that we need to let others have this same opportunity, too.

28 Preventing dementia⁵⁶ [R213]

According to early Buddhism, the mind is the most important faculty we have. In fact, it is the most precious thing we have: it is the vehicle to awakening and true liberation. Buddhism has a lot to teach about the mind: Buddhism *is* about our mind.

⁵⁶ Previous title: "Your mind, use it or lose it (Preventing dementia)."

28 Preventing dementia [R213]

Experts say that if we really want to ward off dementia, we need to start taking care of our brain in our 30s and 40s, or even earlier. More than that, the Buddha teaches us that we need to take care of our mind. This is something no scientific machine can yet measure very accurately, if ever. (How do we really measure love or happiness?)

Various mental health experts have suggested some useful advice in living a full useful and happy life. Here are some tips in the light of Buddhist teachings on mental health, teaching us how to burn our candles right to the last drip of wax.

(1) Eat as we need. If we really feel our body, it will tell us what kind of food is good for us. The Buddha's early saints ate frugally, stopping to eat just before they felt full. To prevent taking more food, they would drink some water. In other words, eat to live. Those who live to eat, generally do not live long or healthy lives.

(2) Being vegetarian is great if we are up to it. Experts tell us that the antioxidants in fruits and vegetables clear up some of the damage caused by free radicals, one of the leading killers of brain cells. The point is to eat more vegetables and fruits than we eat meat as far as we can. Diet alone does not make us a good or happy person.

(3) Commensal eating, to the early Buddhists, is a happy and social event. This is still a common event in Buddhist communities. Try eating at least one meal a day with family and friends. This helps us slow down our eating, and to socialize. Even if we must eat alone, the rule is to really enjoy our meal. Savour the taste and feel of every mouthful. That's mindful eating.

(4) Join a club or organization that needs volunteers. Buddhist centres often need volunteers from doing something as simple as wiping the Buddha image or ushering people during weekly puja to helping in running their activities. Start volunteering right now, and we will have friends and feel needed even after we retire.

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(5) Enjoy the great outdoors, especially spacious gardens, the seaside and hills. When we find such a spot that we like, just sit for a while in complete silence, observing and absorbing the spaciousness and beauty all around. Close our eyes, imagine what we have seen. Repeat this until we can visualize that spaciousness. This is a meditation known as the perception of space.

(6) Enjoy bright spacious nature, especially during the morning hours. You might like to try watching the sun rising, and the horizon brightening up, or simply watch the spacious brightness all round. Observe the brightness, then close our eyes and visualize it. Repeat this until we can visualize the light in our mind's eye. This is a meditation known as the perception of light.

(7) Walk. The Buddha walked all his life and lived to a ripe 80 years. The early saints too were regular walkers, walking for thousands of kilometres every year all over the Gangetic plain of northern central India, teaching and meeting people, or simply meditating in beautiful nature. Daily walking helps reduce the risk of dementia by making the heart pump blood to the brain. None of the saints ever had dementia.

(8) Travel. When we travel, we work our brains to navigate new and complex environments. Experienced taxi drivers have been found to have larger brains because they have to store much information about locations and how to get there. The ancient wandering forest monks had no maps, and had to memorize their routes. They were regularly wandering, but never lost.

(9) Read and write daily or whenever you can. Reading stimulates many different brain areas that process and store information. Likewise, creative writing, even writing letters, stimulates many areas of the brain as well. What we read and write, too, should be wholesome and have a positive outlook of life.

28 Preventing dementia [R213]

(10) Use both hands. Using both hands works both sides of our brain. Knitting, for example, demands the dexterity of both hands. So do some computer games, but such games should not be violent or unwholesome. Practise writing with our other hand for a few minutes daily or whenever you like. This will exercise the other side of our brain and fire up those neurons before they die out like unwatered plants.

(11) Have a hobby or a few. Bird-watching, for example, gives us a gentle exercise in nature, while getting to know it better. Hobbies liven up the mind because we are trying something new and complex. The Buddha was born under a tree, awakened as Buddha under another, taught under many different trees, and passed away under two of them. He was truly a man of nature.

(12) Listen to classical music. Good music seems to work on both sides of the brain, linking the two. Listen with both body and mind. Sit comfortably and feel the flow of the music. Learning to play a musical instrument is even better. This might be harder as we age, but still it helps to develop a dormant part of our brain. Music also helps us in the perception of impermanence.

(13) Play board games. Chess, Scrabble, Cluedo and such games not only liven up your brain, but also helps us socialize. Even playing solo games, such as solitaire or online computer brain games can be helpful, although the social aspect is missing.

(14) Learn a new language. Whether it's a foreign language or sign language, we are working our brain back and forth between one language and another. One of the easiest languages to learn (other than English) is Pali, the scriptural language of early Buddhism. It has a fixed vocabulary and a simple grammar. It is also a more direct way of learning some of the earliest Buddhist teachings.

(15) Take lifelong classes. Learning apparently helps us live longer because it causes physical and chemical changes in our brain. After

all, the true purpose of life is to learn and grow. The body ages, but the mind goes on, life after life, and needs to keep on learning until it is really free.

(16) Silent prayer. Daily prayer with positive words and wishes empowers us. The best prayer is that of lovingkindness, which begins with wishing ourselves well and happy, and then extending this to others, until we boundlessly include everyone, even animals, without any exception. When our joy becomes truly unconditional, or peaceful enough, we simply and silently enjoy the moment.

(17) Meditate. More people, whether religious or not, are discovering the benefits and joy of meditation. Not just any meditation, but especially the Buddha's early mindfulness methods. Meditation not only helps us deal with stress, but also opens our minds up to greater focus and creativity—and a long healthy, useful and peaceful life, heading for awakening. The Buddha declares that those who do breath meditation regularly will have a calm and clear mind right to the end.⁵⁷

(18) Get enough rest. Rest firstly means taking time away from what we do for money or for others. We need to regularly spend some quiet time just being our wholesome selves. Secondly, our body needs rest from its daily toil. If we respect our body, we will know when it needs a break. Our body will tell us how much uninterrupted sleep we need.

May our minds become clearer even as our bodies age.

29 From stumbling-blocks to stepping-stones [R214]

The world's worst floods of recent times occurred during the 2011 monsoon in Thailand, most severely in the Chao Phraya river basin. Beginning in late July and continuing for four months, the floods

⁵⁷ See **Mahā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta** (M 62), SD 3.11.

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affected over 2.3 million people, with over 500 deaths, and caused damages estimated at up to 156.7 billion baht (USD5.1 billion). The flooding affected about six million hectares of land, over 300,000 hectares of which were farmland, in 58 provinces, from Chiang Mai in the north to parts of the capital, Bangkok, near the Chao Phraya mouth.

Seven major industrial estates were submerged by as much as 3 meters (10 feet) of water. Amongst these were the factories of one of our kindest Buddhist supporters. One of his first urgent responses was to transfer his existing orders to overseas competitors so as not to affect his customers. Fortunately, all his factories were fully insured. Still, he would lose 70% of his business for the next 6 months, without any compensation.

Despite this, his thoughts were with some 3000 workers affected by the floods, a number of whom lost their homes and properties. His office raised one million baht within three days to help such Thai co-workers. They formed a Thai Flood Relief Team to help them rebuild their houses, and get back on their feet.

Personally, he had survived Mt Kailash in 2002, a triple bypass in 2004, and the Lehman financial crisis in 2008. Yet he reflects that there would be more opportunities with every crisis. However, things would have to get worse before they get better. He assures us that we will overcome all obstacles and survive,...in cycles.

Fortunately, he confides, he is more of a saver and giver than a borrower or spender. So don't worry about him, he said, but pray for the flood victims. This is the nature of samsara, unpredictable and impermanent. And he thanked us for our concerns. He closes his email message with a reassuring "Cheers (when the water subsides)."

When I first read his message, images of devastating ancient floods in the world's great civilizations appeared in pastiches in my mind:

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the Huanghe in China, the rivers of India, the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia, the Nile in Egypt and wherever great rivers ran. Water gives us life and movement; water can also take away whatever we treasure. It is as if the water element, through its floods, is teaching us never to take things for granted. What we gain, by that very token, means we can lose it.

More significantly, we can enjoy the wealth and blessings that nature provides us for a limited time only. We can celebrate life only when we understand that we can lose everything we have loved or worked for. For losses and pains are better teachers than gains and pleasures.

Water is everywhere. There is water inside us; there is water all around us. Our internal water element and the external water element are the same. We are all earth, water, fire and wind. We are all impermanent, changing, becoming other.

Thus, in times of difficulties and losses, we will see our good sides, our desire to learn, our will to recover. Sometimes when we are deprived of all that we “have,” we begin to truly touch what we “are.” Things, we can only *have*, but goodness and resilience are what we truly *are*, what we must be. This is the beauty and verity of the first noble truth: only in really looking at pain in the eye, can we get out of its sight. No pain, no gain: know pain, no suffering.

It is fascinating, and rewarding, to learn about how many of the illustrious minds who found greatness when their lives were flooded with difficulties. Yet, they refused to drown in their trials and tribulations. We are reminded, for example, of how O Henry became one of the greatest short story writers in the English language.

O Henry (1862-1910), the American short story writer, whose real name was William Sydney Porter was, in 1896, charged with having embezzled money while working as a teller in an Austin, Texas, bank some years before. He fled to Honduras, and thereafter visited

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several South American countries. While holed up in a Trujillo hotel for several months, he wrote *Cabbages and Kings* (1904), in which he coined the term "banana republic" to describe the country (Honduras), and which became an expression for any small, unstable third-world country.

In 1897, on hearing that his wife was dying, he returned to Austin, well knowing he would risk prosecution. His wife died on July, 1897. Indeed, in the following year, he was arrested and sentenced to serve five years in the Ohio penitentiary. Later, his innocence was established, and that had he originally stood trial, he would have been acquitted. He was released on July 24, 1901, for good behavior after serving three years.

Apparently, it was while in prison that he wrote some of his great works, and where he first adopted the pen-name of O Henry. In 1902, he settled in New York, where he produced a regular series of greatly popular stories (such as my schoolboy's favourite, "The Last Leaf"). They are characterized by a rich imagination, reminiscent of *The Arabian Nights*, of which he knew well. Some, however, have criticized him for his "literary vaudeville" of constant striving for effect and the excessive use of slang. He is perhaps best loved for his myriad insights into the humanity in New York City, and for his stories' wit, wordplay, warmth and clever "twist endings."⁵⁸

Both my kind friend whose factories have been inundated in Thailand recently and O Henry's troubles at the turn of the 20th century are each telling us, in their own way, that although material wealth is out there to be made, it is when we are deprived of the most precious things we own, that we would see the wealth that is truly ours. That wealth is our true genius, our heart, undefined by worldly wealth, but defining it, making it worthwhile and liberating. With

⁵⁸<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F40A17FA3F5F13738DDDAD0A94D8415B868DF1D3>: view.

such wealth, we have truly lived well, and will warm others into wanting to live well, too.

Both the stories of the kind friend and of O Henry are inspiring to us because, in important ways, at their best, they re-enact the Buddha's renunciation of the world. The Buddha, however, is unsurpassed in having given up everything he *has*: his wealth, even his kingdom, his family, even his wife and only son, and in previous lives, even his own life. As a Bodhisattva, he dies for us, many times over; as the Buddha, he lives for us. No greater love has a man than to live, life after life, for the liberation of others. This is the supreme sacrifice anyone can make. For, on account of this, we, after the Buddha, need only to walk the path he has opened up for us.

30 Time for “monks” to pay income tax? [R215]

“Monks face foreign pressure of foreign competition. Income from prayer sessions down as foreign monks charge lower rate” (Straits Times, 18 Nov 2011 page B2). Most serious Buddhist practitioners would be shocked – not at what is being reported, but the matter-of-fact-way in which it was reported. The impression a non-Buddhist or foreigner might have is that “Buddhist monks” routinely charge fees for last rites. This is far from the truth, but a religious demand attracts supply that is simply embarrassing to those who take Buddhism as a noble teaching of awakening.

Firstly, it must be stressed that these “professional” funeral ritualists are hardly monks of any colour. Certainly not Buddhist monks. Traditionally, the canonical teachings clearly record that Buddhist monks should not waste their time in such rituals. In the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (D 16), recording the Buddha's last days, we see the Buddha

30 Time for “monks” to pay income tax? [R215]

as instructing Ānanda not to bother about his last rites, as other wise and capable lay men can perform them.⁵⁹

Monastics have been instructed by the Buddha to avoid rituals (these actually prevent them from even attaining the first stage of sainthood). They are to direct their energies to Dharma training and meditation to overcome their desires, negative emotions and delusion, and to awaken in this life itself. If we accept this as the definition of “monk,” then surely these professional ritualists are more correctly called “priests.”

The Straits Times reported that the local priests were unhappy because they generally charge about \$1200 for each funeral ritual, while foreign priests (their competitors) charge only about half their rate! As far as silver linings go, many of us would have good reason to thank the foreign monks for such healthy competition. Lay Buddhists, bereaved of their loved ones, often complain to their leaders and teachers, that they cannot afford such exorbitant costs for the last rites (which also include fees for the undertakers, entertaining and other expenses).

On the other hand, with such priests earning thousands a month (to put it conservatively), driving around in their Mercedes and BMW, owning property, having affairs and families—basically living just like any other lay persons who earn even less, but pay income tax, it is time that these ritual professionals pay tax, too. Then the country might have all the more valid reasons to keep out the foreign competitors.

The good news is that, over the years, responding to such persistent simony in popular “Buddhism,” concerned Buddhists and centres have quietly started their own bedside and extreme services (“extreme” here is a special adjective relating to last rites). Such groups

⁵⁹ See **Mahāparinibbāna Sutta** (D 16,5.10/2:141) n & SD 9 (7a).

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comprise of lay Buddhists who do their own group chanting of meaningful Pali or Chinese sacred texts (depending on the tradition), and also instruct and guide the bereaved on the simple rituals for the wellbeing of the deceased as well as the welfare and wisdom of the living.

Many concerned Buddhists are working hard to educate their students and followers that the deaths of loved ones, even one's pets, are crucial moments for learning the "hard" truths of reality that the Buddha teaches. The key element in helping the sick, the dying and the dead, is that of lovingkindness, a wholesome state of mind that unconditionally embraces the sick, the departing or the deceased, as we would accept ourselves. When family members, loved ones and friends gather with one heart to extend such a precious space of love and acceptance to the sick, the dying and the deceased, they can all truly benefit from its vitality. This is just like having all our good friends and well-wishers gently touching our shoulders and telling us: "You're OK, we love you and accept you just as you are. We wish you well!" Of course, it is much more than this.⁶⁰

The tragicomedy of engaging "professional" ritual priests is one of the truly pathological symptoms of a dead religion, a fear of death, superstitions about luck and personal purity, or simply putting up a public face so that people do not gossip about us. Nothing here really would benefit the dead!

Firstly, the reciters have mostly only memorized their texts without really knowing their meaning or significance. Secondly, most family members of the bereaved find such rituals actually meaningless and an unsavoury drudge which they want to get over as quickly as possible. Thirdly, such rituals are often merely tolerated because some strong-willed or worried sibling or relative demands it, so it is done for the sake of family harmony, not as anything religious.

⁶⁰ See eg **Tiro,kudda Sutta** (Kh 7 = Pv 1.5), SD 2.7.

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Fourthly, the ritualists are merely performing a “magical” ritual, as it is centred around the words and sounds, and not their personal moral virtue or lovingkindness. In fact, at the end of the ritual, when payment must be made, the ritualist would, as a rule, openly check the “red packet” of fees to ensure that the money is correct. If not, they would demand the difference!

Isn't it strange, even bizarre, if we should dress up our dead in finery and are willing or forced to spend such a large sum of money for his last rites, but in his own life-time we had not treated him so well? If we treat our loved ones well while they live, and when their time comes, even simple but personalized last rites would be truly meaningful. The question is whether our love is greater, or our superstition.

The loss of our loved ones is too sacred and meaningful to be left to moneytheistic ritual priests. If we truly love our dearly departed, we should begin by constantly keeping them in our meditation, our heart of lovingkindness. If we celebrate birthdays together, we should celebrate dying moments together, too. For, there is really no death, only a parting moment, a new life starting. We are apart only for the moment, until we meet again.

When our own final moment comes, surely we would prefer our loved ones warmly bidding us farewell, and not some unloving rented and dubious priest making strange loud noises for an exorbitant fee to an uneasy and distant crowd.

Simply put, such a state of affairs is symptomatic of a deeper sickness. Yet, we do not see this amongst informed Buddhists or in western Buddhism. We can heal all this if we really care and have some moral courage. To begin with, we need a healthy local Buddhism.

When we were born we cried, while others around us smiled on at us. When we move on, let us smile, while the people around us cry.

Cry if you like, if this is good for you. But better it is to meaningfully gather in the name of our beloved deceased, and to remember his or her goodness. And touching our own inner peace and clarity, let us dedicate the goodness to the deceased. Buddhism is about living well, and dying is just a dot, a period, before we begin a new story, where we will all live happily ever after.

31 We are not born human [R216]

We are born with only a human body; we are not born human. The humanizing begins with our human parents. Parents who nourish their children with both solid food and the food of love, especially for the first formative seven years of our lives, provide us with the best conditions of a human state.

This is a key reason, amongst others, why we should be grateful to them. Conversely, this is what defines a parent, that is, not merely a biological condition for birth, but also the humanizing of us. More broadly, whoever raises us to be humans, and good humans, too, have truly parented us. They are our true creator-God, and our first teachers.⁶¹

There are accounts of feral children, who were raised by wolves or monkeys, since they were infants. Apparently, those rescued early (while still infants or prepubescent) could be humanized, but attempts, even by scientists and experts, at socializing those who were older proved to be impossible or never completely successful.⁶²

⁶¹ *Brahmā'ti mātā, pitaro, pubb'ācariyā'ti vuccare* (A 1:132, 2:70 f; It 110; J 5:330 f).

⁶² Many accounts of feral children were, however, false or invented for dubious purposes. For references, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feral_child.

31 We are not born human [R216]

The Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta (M 129) (the discourse on the wise and the foolish) says that those who are attached to the faculty of taste (without cultivating the higher faculties, especially the mind) are reborn as plant-feeding animals. Those who make a living from religious rituals, like the sacrificial brahmins or the commercialized priests of our own times, would be reborn as dirt-feeding animals (like chickens, pigs and dogs).⁶³

Others who fail to sustain their lives as true humans, often falling into subhuman behaviour, habitually have minds of those kinds of beings. They may have human bodies, but they are aggressive in reaping profits and success, exploiting others and measuring them in terms of selfish gains and money. They are virtual titans or asuras, violent grasping demons.

Those who simply live cyclic lives of merely looking for food and fun, with predictable emotions, and a lack of the desire for learning, are virtual animals (who are born, feed, play, reproduce, and die). They live in the dark, or in water, or in filth. They eat each other and prey on the weak. Because of the lack of spiritual life, no doing of what is wholesome, in such states, it is very difficult for such animals to gain the human state (Dh 182).⁶⁴

Those habitually addicted to some kinds of substances, or never really enjoying anything, no matter how much they may have, are virtual shades or pretas. Those who are regularly violent and intolerant, caught up in killing one another, mass bombing others and being bombed themselves, are in a virtual hell state.

This is the myth of the five destinies—the devas, the humans, the animals, the pretas, and the hell-beings,⁶⁵ and the myth of the six

⁶³ **Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129.18-19/3:167 f), SD 2.22.

⁶⁴ See also “Becoming human: it’s easier than you think”, Piya Tan, *Revisiting Buddhism*, 2011: ch 2.

⁶⁵ **Pañcagati Sutta** (A 9.68/4:459), SD 2.20.

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realms, including the asuras. These mythical beings lurk in the shadows of our minds, ever ready to transmogrify themselves into our consciousness, dehumanizing and deluding us, and destroying many. We are rarely aware of these states when we fall into them. Only in keeping to the basic rules of humanity—the five precepts⁶⁶—are we safe from sinking into these subhuman shadows.

The five precepts are the minimum standards of being human. They are the quality control for our human lives. When we keep our precepts well, we will never fall into such subhuman states, or worse, be reborn into them, and spend unimaginably long periods in those unhappy states.

The five precepts are the bases for our moral training, so that we cultivate moral virtue that keeps us truly human. The first precept is to value life (the first and foremost universal value). The second is to respect the happiness of others, which behooves us not to take away by theft and fraud what rightly belongs to others. The third precept against sexual misconduct is really about respect for personal freedom, the right of a person to say “no.”

The fourth precept, that of refraining from false speech, is about wholesome communication. Basically, what we communicate should be truthful, should promote good friendship and social harmony, should be pleasant and proper, and should in some way be beneficial, if not, instructive.

While the first three precepts are about right action of our body, the fourth is about our speech. Along with the mind, the body and speech constitute the three “doors” of karma or morally efficacious action. They are actions, conscious or unconscious, which bear similar consequences upon us, after committing them.

⁶⁶ See **Velu,dvāreyya Sutta** (S 55.75), SD 1.5.

31 We are not born human [R216]

The fifth precept, that of refraining from intoxicants and addictive substances, is to keep the mind free as a basis for inner calm and clarity. Indeed, if we are intoxicated or unmindful, we are more likely to break any or all of the other humanizing precepts.

When our moral virtue is strong, we are free from fear and guilt of things done or undone, so that our hearts easily enjoy a deep level of inner peace. This is our “divinizing” process, as it were. We are naturally able to feel and show unconditional love, even without religion. We are easily compassionate to others, being kind to them even when they do not deserve it. We simply feel happy at the happiness of others. And when things do not go right, our hearts are clearly calm so that we, untroubled by negative emotions, simply do what needs to be done next.⁶⁷

Through keeping the precepts, our good works become truly effective. We are not merely *showing* that we are good: we *are* really good. Through our moral virtue, we enjoy heaven here and now. More importantly, it is easier to become a streamwinner, one who has boarded the safe and sure boat down the stream to nirvana in this life itself.

32 Unsatisfactory religions [R217]

The Sandaka Sutta (M 76) speaks of four kinds of unsatisfactory religions or belief-systems, namely:

- (1) knowledge-based religion
including claims of omniscience,
- (2) scripture-based religion
mostly belief in an almighty creator-God,
- (3) reason-based (speculative) religion

⁶⁷ See **(Alabbhānīya) Tḥāna Sutta** (A 5.48), SD 42.1.

- includes intellectual and materialist systems,
(4) foolish religion
superstitions, views of the gullible and the deluded.

It should be noted that these four types of “unsatisfactory systems” do not undermine the principles of wholesome religion, but that *they bring neither moral discipline nor spiritual liberation.*

Here, I have used “belief-system” (including religion) broadly to mean *any system founded on sense-based evidence*. In this sense, the meditative aspects of early Buddhism are *non-religious*, insofar as they transcend the physical senses, and works on mental focus, inner stillness and spiritual insight.

(1) Knowledge-based religion. A “knowledge-based religion” or tradition-based system here specifically refers to a system whose leader or followers claim to have some level of omniscience, especially that one can know everything *all* the time. In our own times, we have word-based (logocentric) religions that claim their God or religious figure have such an omniscience.

Since almost anything can be made out of words, it is possible to imagine the most fabulously omniscient being. Philosophically, there is the problem that *we cannot define anything into existence*. Just because we are able to “refer” (in words) to a *unicorn*, an idea supported by countless stories and even images and movies, in no way proves that it exists, except in our minds.

(2) Scripture-based religion. A “scripture-based religion” is usually one that relies almost exclusively on a holy book. Their general principle is that whatever is written in the holy book is right and must be accepted so without question. Various ways of enforcing such a dogma are used, the most common is the threat of being thrown into hell for unbelief. This threat is rarely, if ever, taken seriously today because most of us do not believe in such notions.

32 Unsatisfactory religions [R217]

Early Buddhism teaches that it is more useful to understand heaven and hell as mental states rather than actual places. If we habitually conduct ourselves well, we would be able to live quite happily here and now. If, on the other hand, we habitually do bad, it will catch up with us in due course. We do not have to wait for any future life.

Holy books tend to be dogmatic, and they need to be so, as words can mean anything to anyone, depending on the agenda of whoever has the power or respect to interpret them, rightly or wrongly. So the leader has to make sure that his version is the one people follow. “Dogmatic” refers to the notion that the truth is in the word, that is, the truth is defined *externally*, rather than as true reality (which is beyond words). Every preacher has his God.

Scripture-based religions are especially harmful to the individual when they are *tribal*, so that individual voices are never heard, drowned by groupthink or tribal hearsay. Such religions tend to teach that the world and the universe were God-created, and man is ordained as the master of the fishes of the seas, the birds of the skies, and all living animals on the earth. God creates and destroys the world as he will. As such, man has almost no role or motivation for a sustainable environment as the world would sooner or later be destroyed anyway.⁶⁸

(3) Reason-based religion. A “reason-based religion” or a rationalistic system is basically a speculative system. This means that we only accept something if we think it is modern, scientific or “evidence“-based. Words like “modern” and “scientific” can be problematic.

⁶⁸ See **The Three Roots Inc**, SD 31.12 (6.1.1.2) & Lynn White Jr, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* ns 155,3767, 10 Mar 1967: 1203-1207. Download from: http://www.drexel.edu/greatworks/Theme-Fall/~media/Files/greatworks/pdf_fall09/HistoricalRoots_of_EcologicalCrisis.ashx or <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>.

Does “modern” mean fashionable or up-to-date, but even then how is this related to good and happiness?

The word “scientific,” too, is problematic, unless we are scientists ourselves. Even then, not all scientists agree on everything, especially on matters that are beyond science (like religion). Moreover, we often see commercial advertisements trying to sell things because they have some “scientific” benefits. If we try to promote on “scientific” advantages, then surely, science must be better than religion! Then why not simply turn to science, and forget about religion.

The word “evidence” is even more problematic. Let us take “evidence” as meaning what is palpable or measurable by way of the human sense-faculties. As history, current affairs and common sense have repeatedly shown us, such views and “facts” are sometimes well-reasoned, sometimes badly reasoned, some true, some false. Such a system is unsatisfactory insofar as it tries to reduce all things, including human thought and conduct, to reason, that is, some kind of logical and sensible processes that we can always physically experience or measure, that is, some form of sense-based evidence.

We know very well that logic might work with palpable or measurable things, but most human conduct is immeasurable, as it is *feeling-based*: how do we measure love, desire, hate, ignorance, fear, and other such emotions. Our most significant actions and decisions often over-rule or ignore all reason and logic. This is very clear in such situations as falling in love, our desire to buy things, our drive for pleasure, or our motivation to do good or evil.

Moreover, our senses do not always make good sense of what we experience. Our senses work rather as *filters*, straining and twisting what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think. Moreover, we often *superimpose* our own memories and ideas—our perceptions—onto our sense-experiences. Hence, we mostly only see what we want, hear what we want, and think only what we want. With

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remarkable insight and intrepidity, **the Saṅgāraṇa Sutta** (M 100) actually says that such religions, and academic and scientific systems are based on mere faith, that is, insofar as they fully rely on *the physical senses* as the proof or evidence for their beliefs without understanding how the mind fabricates and influences such sense-experiences! Of course, such systems may still work if the faith is based on wisdom, that is, experiential knowledge that is beneficial for everyone.

(4) Foolish religion. “Foolish religion” refers to the most common belief amongst humans. Its major features are that its followers are simply motivated by greed, hate, delusion, or fear (often all four). They invariably believe in some kind of “self” or “soul” that is related to our physical body. Such a view only promotes selfishness and often a fixed idea of things, such as fatalism.

The foolish, when faced with problems, tend to look for answers outside of themselves—such as in God, gods, ghosts, spirits, magic, and rituals—instead of trying to understand their own minds. As a rule, the foolish often doubt or lack faith in their own spiritual capacity, and feel dependent on others or some external “power” for succour and salvation.

Believers in a foolish religion tend to be fearful and gullible. Very often, they would place their full trust and blind faith in a charismatic preacher or guru figure who is a spin master and adept manipulator. Without any practical understanding of the human mind and behaviour, such groups and preachers might actually regard their teachings and practices as being good for everyone. Often enough, their rules and rituals serve mainly to keep them in the rut of their exclusive group, even at the cost of their emotional health and spiritual development.

We may be born with a human body, but we need to cultivate the human spirit ourselves. Our parents and society may condition us to

behave as social beings, but we are left to ourselves to evolve into spiritual beings. A spiritual being is an individual of the spirit, that is, the mind/heart. Our individuation begins with the opening of our hearts to accepting ourselves just as we are, and to unconditionally include others in our lives as we evolve spiritually.⁶⁹

33 Buddhist love training⁷⁰ [R218]

Generally, love refers to a wide range of feelings, states and attitudes, ranging from pleasure (“I love the countryside”), to interpersonal attraction (“I love you”); or from infatuation, to sexual desire; or on a higher dimension, from joyful faith to an overwhelming sense of selfless union with one’s object of faith.

Ancient Greek philosophy gives us a helpful hierarchy of love, distinguishing at least five levels, that is: *eros*, *storge*, *philia*, *xenia*, and *agape*. **Eros** is erotic or passionate love, that is, sensual desire and longing. In Greek philosophy, although *eros* is basically physical love, an attraction to the body of a person, on a deeper level it is the basis for an appreciation of the person’s inner beauty, or even an appreciation of beauty itself.

Eros, in other words, moves us to recall knowledge of beauty, which in turn spurs us on towards an understanding of spiritual truth. Philosophers, artists, poets, the creative and those in love, are all inspired to seek beauty and truth by *eros*. In other words, this is the underlying spirit in the physical or literary expression of beauty and truth, at least on the worldly level. The Buddhist counterpart of *eros* would be *kāma*, sensual pleasure.

On a less physical but more selfless level, there is **storge**, which is natural affection, like that felt by parents for their offspring, espe-

⁶⁹ See “We are not born human,” R216: see no 31 above.

⁷⁰ Source: Piya Tan, **Love: A Buddhist perspective**, SD 38.4.

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cially a mother's love for her child. This is very close, even a synonym, for example, for the Japanese emotion of *amae*, roughly translated as "indulgent dependence," which is close to the Malay emotion of *manja* (which basically means "pampered").

Philia is a less passionate, more virtuous love, such as found in friendship, brotherhood, or generally non-sexual affection, including loyalty to friends, family, and community. It entails virtue, equality, reciprocity and familiarity, that are of mutual benefit. In an important way, especially amongst the learned, this is an attraction of minds, of the love of learning or of sharing the same or similar vision of life. The Buddhist counterpart of *philia* is *pema*, worldly love, not amounting to *kāma*.

On a broader, more inclusive, level, we have **xenia**, "guest friendship," "ritualized friendship" or hospitality,⁷¹ which was a hallmark of ancient Greek culture, and in the ancient civilized world as a whole, even in the Far East. It was a sort of ritualized friendship between a host and his guest, even on their first meeting. The host would feed and provide quarters for the guest, who was expected to show his gratitude. The importance of *xenia* recurs constantly in Greek mythology,⁷² especially Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The Buddhist counterpart to *xenia* would be *paṭisanthāra*.

During the time of Plato (424/423-348/347 BCE) and other ancient western writers, **agape** was used in various forms to denote the love for a spouse or family, or affection for a particular activity, in

⁷¹ Cf "respect for hospitality," *paṭisanthāra, gāravatā*: (**Upagantabba**) **Kula Sutta** (A 9.17) @ SD 37.11 (7).

⁷² In the Ovid's fable of the aged couple, **Philemon and Baucis**, Zeus Xenios ("of the travellers") and Hermes (Roman: Jupiter and Mercury), disguised as peasants, were turned away by everyone else in the town, except the aged couple, who feasted the duo. Zeus then instructed them to retreat to a hill-top while he flooded and drowned the whole town (*Metamorphoses* 8.611-724): http://www.mythology.us/ovid_metamorphoses_book_8.htm

contrast to *philia* (an affection denoting friendship, brotherhood or generally non-sexual affection) and *eros*, sexual attraction. In Christianity, it usually refers to God's fatherly love for man, and man's reciprocal love for God, which is also extended to one's fellow men (but not all beings, as in Buddhism). *Agape*, as such, is close to the Buddhist *mettā*, which, as unconditional lovingkindness, embracing all things, and spiritually much more inclusive than *agape*.

Early Buddhism turns on love, and it does so on three wholesome levels, that is, in terms of the three trainings (*sikkhā*).⁷³ Buddhist training begins with love and respect for *others*, practised and expressed through moral virtue, that is, keeping to the five precepts by the laity and to monastic discipline by the renunciants. This basic level of loving respect is expressed through the body and speech.

We communicate with each other through speech and body language. When both of these means of social communication are well regulated and tempered with love and respect, it becomes the life-blood of a wholesome community and society. The most important benefit of such an environment is that it is a vital foundation for mental cultivation, that is, the development of the heart.

On a social level, this makes it possible for us to be in touch with the depths of our creativity so that we can express beauty and truth in various ways. Buddhist aesthetics, in other words, is rooted in the calm and clarity of our hearts, and find expression through our six senses: the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind. We create works that are visually beautiful, music and sounds that are harmonious, aromas that refresh, foods that nourish, touch that heals, and thoughts that inspire and awaken us.

On a spiritual level, a calm and clear heart is the basis for personal development. A calm heart rises above and beyond the prison of

⁷³ On the 3 trainings, see *Sīla samādhi paññā*, SD 21.6; also *Kāma-c-chanda*, SD 32.2 (3.2).

33 Buddhist love training [R218]

words to directly feel what our heart-mind really is. We rise above the personal grammar of duality to feel the all-embracing, boundless space of ineffable bliss. When all the existential dust has settled, our mind's eye sees with greater clarity the true nature of our being.

Having emerged from such thought-free spaciousness, we must simply spill over with a zest for conveying its bliss and clarity in words and ways that awaken the slumbering world. The beauty and truth that we variously convey in our actions and speech would surely somehow inspire others to realize that they, too, are capable of such a blissful and liberating awakening. This is the spirit of Buddhist mental training.

Ultimately, the disciplined self and the liberated heart open the door to wisdom training. All that beauty and truth that we have tasted for ourselves begin to be expressed in communicable ways through our speech and actions. It is a profound wisdom that sees how the love for bodies and persons can only be ephemeral and unsatisfactory. We begin to understand that love is not taking but giving; not seeking attention, but giving it; more than the dead past or the absent future, it is the eternal present. We realize that true love is our presence in every sense of the word.⁷⁴

34 Duties of those who have⁷⁵ [R219]

The **Anaṇa Sutta** (A 4.62) comprehensively defines the Buddha's attitude towards wealth as follows:

⁷⁴ Further see "The greatest love," *Simply Joys 2: Healing Words*, 2011: 96-98 (no 33).

⁷⁵ A slightly edited excerpt from **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8 (6.2.3.2). Previous title: "Duties of the rich."

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- (1) The joy of ownership, that is, the satisfaction derived from having earned a living for ourselves so that we are economically secure; this is the joy of *having*.
- (2) The joy of enjoyment, that is, the opportunity of directly benefitting from the wealth we have rightly earned: this is the joy of *being*.
- (3) The joy of debtlessness, that is, all our debts are settled, so that we are now really working for our own happiness, doing what we wish with our wealth, and we are financially independent. We can now rejoice in the joy of *giving*.
- (4) The joy of blamelessness, that is, we have worked and conducted ourselves in a manner that no one can justly find fault with us. Our actions are in some way beneficial to others, too. This is the joy of *doing*.

(A 4.62/2:69-71), SD 2.2

Clearly here, in the teachings of early Buddhism, we see wealth not merely as something that we *have*, but as something that we *are*. Wealth, in other words, has a purpose, that is, to generate and sustain happiness in self and in others. We cannot be really happy, all alone, especially when there are those who are socially and economically deprived around us. We do not merely have houses, but a home that includes its environment. On a natural scale, that environment is society, if not the world.

It is therefore helpful in contributing towards a wholesome community, a good society and a better world. This becomes easier in a right livelihood context, where we are not just *being* good (keeping to the precepts, meditating, and so on), but also *doing* good works. This is not just doing what we are told, as in a corporation or in politics, but enjoying our work, and wanting to share that bliss with others.

34 Duties of those who have [R219]

The philosophy behind *the industrial revolution*⁷⁶ is profitable production, and humans are merely resources, producers and consumers. The philosophy underpinning *capitalism*⁷⁷ is that we have the right to own and enjoy the fruits of our work, or we could work for money. In both cases, we have become measurable producers and consumers, controlled by “wealth” and “market forces.”

However, Buddhist economics—the effective use of wealth as if life matters—is not only about a happy *household (oikos)* but must also support a wholesome society and healthy environment (ecology).⁷⁸ If we *have* sufficient wealth, then we *are* in an advantageous position to *act* in a proactive manner to bring about wholesome support, growth and changes around, even beyond, us.

Hence, it behooves the rich to help the poor and needy with compassion and wisdom. Poverty and need are not choices that the laity

⁷⁶ **The Industrial Revolution** (18th-19th cent) was a period of major changes in agriculture, manufacturing, mining, transportation, and technology, which had profound effects on our social, economic and cultural conditions to this day. As a historical turning-point, it affected almost every aspect of daily life in some way, esp average income and population, which saw unprecedented sustained growth. Its success was partly due to colonialism, whereby Britain (where the Revolution started), other European countries, and Japan conquered and colonized other countries to exploit their people, space, labour and resources. The Revolution’s negative effects continue even today in terms of impersonalizing us (eg by way of consumerism) and promoting materialism, and a dominant Christian “heritage.” For refs: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Revolution.

⁷⁷ **Capitalism** is an economic system that arose in western society after the demise of feudalism. Basically, its elements include private ownership of the means of production, creation of goods or services for profit, the accumulation of capital (wealth), competitive markets and wage labour. It is closely associated with the Industrial Revolution.

⁷⁸ See **Sappurisa Dāna Sutta** (A 5.148) @ SD 22.15 (3): Wealth and well-being.

make:⁷⁹ poverty and need fall upon many individuals, who otherwise could be more productive or creative in some way. When such surplus wealth is *given* systematically, effectively and compassionately, we generate greater happiness in society. This is one important way of raising the happiness and quality of our community.

There is a range of wholesome giving for the benefit of others. The most basic is that of material giving, that of providing the four supports: food, clothing, shelter and health. Without these basics, it is hard for anyone to go beyond the routine of even surviving a human life. Yet, such giving must encourage and empower them to realize their personal potential and talents so that their lives are rich and enriching in their own ways.

The greatest gift, as stated in the suttas, is the gift of the Dharma,⁸⁰ that is, the teaching and spreading of the Buddha Word for the sake of moral virtue, mental cultivation and liberating wisdom. With our wealth, we can initiate or support such **Dharma-moved initiatives**, as,

- social projects, especially related to personal health, social harmony and wholesome culture,
- individual-centred projects, especially mental health and personal creativity, and
- wisdom-based projects, that is, the nurturing of Dharma understanding that is personally liberating and socially uplifting.

⁷⁹ Monastics, as renunciants, are by definition economically “poor” and insecure; for, their task is spiritual security and awakening in this life itself, and to be an inspiration to us, the worldly, who in turn support them out of wise faith.

⁸⁰ (**Saṅgaha**) **Bala Sutta** (A 9.5.6/4:364 f), SD 2.21 & Dh 354a.

35 The necessity of right livelihood⁸¹ [R220]

Economics and ecology. Apart from sleep, most of us spend more of our lives at work and wage-earning than in any other waking activity. Inevitably, the work that we do powerfully moulds us. An important message of **the Vāseṭṭha Sutta** (M 98 = Sn 3.9), for example, is that we are not born high or low, but *we are the kind of work we do* (Sn 612-619).

Right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) (RL), then, is essentially how we, as followers of the Buddha's teaching, whether monastic or lay, or those who claim to be Buddhist, should support ourselves. In short, it is Buddhist economics at its best. Etymologically, *economics* comes from the Greek, *oikos*, "house, household, habitation" + *nomos*, "manager," and *ecology*, from Greek, *oikos* + *logos*, "word, reason, speech, account." Hence, essentially (on a personal or family level), economics is the knowledge and application of the proper material management of our homes. More broadly (on a macro or global level), it is a theory and practice of the proper management and use of external resources.⁸²

As such, in terms of RL, economics and ecology are intimately intertwined: while economics is the management of the "household," ecology is the management of "the inhabited sphere, or living space," that is, the world itself. RL is the driving spirit underlying all this. At least, this is the way it should be. Such theoretical approaches are useful when we are faced with damage control over the weaknesses and failures of our current economic systems and situations, and in reminding us of how to rethink the issues so that

⁸¹ This is an excerpt from **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8 (1.2).

⁸² See **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8 (7).

we have healthy individuals in a healthy community in a healthy world.⁸³

More broadly, RL may be described as *living and working as if life and happiness really matter*. RL is based on the key understanding that life is the most valuable thing we have and therefore should be respected so. Our most precious possession is, of course, our human life, but we are not alone, as there are also other beings, life-forms and nature that co-exist interdependently in the same space that provides us with food, growth, creativity, procreation and rest.⁸⁴

Ecology, natural and social. This wholesome space which we inhabit called the earth, is, in turn, a part of a bigger and infinite universe. The quality of the relationship within our own family, species and world are ultimately dependent on the kind of physical environment we inhabit and how we relate to others and to nature. This is our ecology, our natural and social space.

By “natural” here is meant how we respect and harmonize with nature, and, to an important extent, how we emulate and enjoy nature. Our social space is where we live, grow, create, breed and rest. The wholesomeness of such vital spaces depends on how *natural* it is. This interbeing with nature not only provides us with physical health and sustains it, but also inspires us to create and enjoy *beauty*.

On a deeper level, natural space inspires and nurtures mental health. Wholesome nature allows us to *breathe* easily and healthily, which, in turn, induces, enhances and supports a calm and clear mind. For Buddhists and many others, nature is a very helpful component of mental cultivation and meditation. In short, nature is a

⁸³ See **Sappurisa Dāna Sutta** (A 5.148) @ SD 22.15 (3.1).

⁸⁴ See **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8 (2.3).

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vital ingredient of our mental well-being so that we are healthy individuals.

A healthy individual is the true measure of a healthy family, society, nation and world. The more healthy individuals there are in a group, the healthier it is. Although it is rare that a group is ever fully filled with healthy individuals, some kind of social code and the wholesome influence of healthy individuals can at least minimize the effects of negative persons, unhealthy situations, and natural disasters. Such a society lives in harmony with nature, mutually benefitting all life. This is a sustainable lifestyle in a healthy environment—this is a broad description of right livelihood.

36 Being everything to everyone [R221]

Set in the 1920s and 1930s, the 1983 mockumentary and comedy film *Zelig* is about Leonard Zelig, a nondescript man who has the ability to totally transform himself chameleon-like to that of someone near him. While mingling with the rich at a party, Zelig sings their praises in a refined, snobbish way, but in the kitchen with the servants, he, in a thick working-class lingo, seethes indignantly at the fat cats. One moment he is a renowned actor, the next a learned doctor; then a baseball player; and after that the son of a famous jazz musician.

When Zelig is admitted to a hospital, he is treated by a woman psychiatrist, Eudora Fletcher. She tries to heal him of his strange disorder. Under hypnotism, she discovers that Zelig has no personality of his own. So strongly does he yearn for security and approval from others that he physically changes to assume the personality of the greatest ego near him.

Through sheer perseverance and love, Eudora cures Zelig, but not without complications. She elevates Zelig's self-esteem so high that, for a while, he swings to the other extreme: he is violently

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intolerant of other people's opinions, no matter how simple! In psychological terms, we can say that Zelig is switching from the defence mechanism of identification to that of aggression.

Eudora, in due course, realizes she is falling in love with Zelig. Through the media, both doctor and patient become famous. Ironically, this very fame is what separates them. In fact, the same society that made Zelig a hero, then destroys him. Numerous women claim that he married them, and legal proceedings ensue. Zelig's disorder returns as he tries to fit in once more, and he disappears.

In due course, Eudora finds him in Germany working with Hitler and the Nazis before the outbreak of World War II. On seeing Eudora, Zelig's memory returns, and together they escape in a war-plane. When Eudora faints in the plane, Zelig, mimicking her flying skills, flies back across the Atlantic upside down. Back in the US, he is welcomed as a hero again.

Those familiar with the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (D 16) will see what a remarkable parallel the Zelig story has with the Buddha's declaration on how he fits in perfectly with the "eight assemblies," that is, those of the nobles, the priests, the householders, the recluses, the Four Great Kings, the Thirty-two Gods, Mara's host, and the host of the High God himself.

"Ānanda, I recall having approached such an assembly of many hundreds, assembled with them before, and conversed with them before, and engaged in discussion with them before. Whatever their complexion was then, so was my complexion, too. Whatever was their voice then, so was my voice, too. I instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with Dharma talk."⁸⁵

Is the Buddha here being a Zelig personality? Appearances, of course, can deceive, but here the Buddha's actions and their effects

⁸⁵ D 16,3.21-23, SD 9.

36 Being everything to everyone [R221]

are just the opposite of what Zelig does. The Buddha is clearly not a hollow attention-starved personality. Indeed, he is *the* awakened one, well known for his love of peace and solitude. The Buddha is a supremely compassionate and effective teacher. Indeed, while Zelig tries to reach *up and out* to what he sees as the desirable qualities of the greatest egos near him, the Buddha skillfully reaches *down and into* those who will benefit from his wisdom.

The lesson here is clear. We can never be truly happy, not to say normal, by merely trying to collect and clothe ourselves with what we see as success or happiness in others. Simply put, we are then simply not ourselves. We may have a social, professional or public personality, but this can never be permanent. We must fill ourselves fully with happiness and goodness: this is what we truly are, or, at least, what we really would like to be.

Often enough, our external lives distract us so that we completely forget to fill ourselves up internally. Instead of looking outwards, we need to look within. We need to look deep enough and carefully study what wholesome qualities we really have, especially qualities that are of mutual benefit to others and to ourselves. We need to do this before the walls of success we have built around us collapse, or the floods of reality overwhelm us. It might just be too late then.

The best way to fill our inner true selves, to live fulfilling lives, is to feel inner peace and enjoy inner beauty. We need to get to know ourselves really better. If not, we will Zelig-like keep looking for approval from others and patterns to mimic. The reality is that we are painfully hollow, helplessly trying to echo and enchant others.

Ultimately, this never satisfies us because this is not our true self. We need the courage to be, that is, to be true to ourselves. Only then we can be true to others. In the Buddha's teachings, we have thus become true individuals.

A very happy new year and many more to come.

37 Power mode, love mode [R222]

There are three basic ways we normally relate to people. We generally measure people, seeing them as being inferior to us, or better than us, or we're both just as good. At each of these levels of relating to others, we might react to others with pleasure or with displeasure, that is, whether we like them or dislike them. Let us here call this contrasting emotional reactions as the "love" mode (accepting response) and the "power" mode (rejecting or controlling response).

How we decide to react to others depends, in an important way, on how we were treated as children and other conditionings such as early religious training or peer influence. Those of us who were generally happy in our childhood and formative years easily respond to others, no matter what level, with healthy respect and positive engagement. We easily make friends and enjoy friendships. This is a vital foundation for greater happiness for ourselves and for others.

Not all of us, however, have pervasive happiness in our past. The worst case scenario is to have abusive and demanding parents who talk down to us and see us merely as a family investment or worse. Since, in our formative years, we have lived with an authority figure, we would naturally react respectfully and reticently to those we perceive as authority figures. If this goes on too long, we might find ourselves becoming more aggressive, especially with others who have had similar "power-mode" conditionings. In fact, we might even become bullies.

Again, if we have only been significantly exposed to down-talking early in life, we might find ourselves talking down to others when we perceive them as being "inferior" to us, that is, those we do not regard as authority figures. Even when people are kind to us or gentle with us, we react rudely or discordantly to them. In psychological lingo, we call this "displacement," that is, unconscious shifting of an

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aggressive feeling towards a “safe” or less anxiety-producing person.

The painful payback is that we would be rejected by those who are unfamiliar with the psychology of human emotions, or are for any reason uncomfortable with such conduct. To worsen the situation, when someone tries to point the truth of our conduct to us, we react angrily or negatively (maybe because this triggers a painful past “power mode” experience). So we are not *responding* to the person before us at all: we are neurotically *reacting* to our past. We are still haunted by our past. The bottom line is that not many people would befriend us, and would not even like us.

What do we do then to heal ourselves? Firstly, we must understand and accept that this negative reactivity of ours is *unconscious*. We simply refuse (at first) to accept that it is even a fault: we are not conscious of it! The reality is that we are hurting others or are doing something very negative for ourselves, too. We are caught in the rut of painfully reactive and unfriendly, even rude, behaviour, so that we might end up being regarded as anti-social.

In short, the healing process starts by our willingness to raise this bad habit, which is an unconscious tendency, up and out into the light of our clear awareness. When the enemy is seen, it is easier to deal with.

The next time we notice any hint of such a reactivity arising, we should mentally pause for a moment. Mindfully examine our thoughts: this might occur surprisingly quickly and clearly enough if we really try. Then, regard the person we are with as a friend (especially when he is one), and try to reword what we are going to say in a positive way. Think of a happy moment or something pleasant, then speak with lovingkindness.

Even if we at first fail, and have reacted to others in a power mode, we can still, after the fact, reflect on what spurred us on uncontrol-

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lably. Reassess our actions and motives so that they are clear of the three negative roots (greed, hate and delusion), or perhaps at least without greed or hate. For, delusion is somehow often present in the unawakened mind. Secondly, it is good to regularly visualize a wonderfully lovingkind person who inspires us. He should be a constant part of our lovingkindness meditation.

On the other hand, what do we do if we meet or know someone like this? Firstly, do not take such a conduct of power-mode as a personal affront. That is the way the person helplessly is at that moment. If we, too, react negatively, then we are only invoking our own past demons. Secondly, the person who fails to communicate in a love mode should be shown great compassion (meaning kindness to others even when they do not deserve it). “Surely such a person would find it difficult to make good friends! Let me wish this person well.”

If the person is receptive enough, or if we are skillful enough, we could gently suggest some kind of role reversal. If the other person is able to see the painful reality of the situation, and owns up, that’s good. If not, continue to be friendly and supportive of the person so that he goes away without feeling that we have confronted him, despite the reality being the reverse. The point is that people will change, and in time, they would acknowledge that we have been a part of their healing process.

On the other hand, if we know the unfriendly person well enough, then it would be easier to help him, with the right moves. Firstly, we must cultivate a heart of lovingkindness towards this person. Then at the right time, patiently point out the negativity of his habitual tendency. Sometimes, a firm statement of truth—“You are being confrontational!”—might help. Sometimes, we might need to employ a middle language of stories of happiness. Otherwise, as already mentioned, we could gently apply a skillful means of role reversal.

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As part of a long-term healing process, we need to inspire the person to think of positive role models and let go of past demons. Usually, such as person might not even like meditation (they might find it difficult), but a simple visualization shouldn't be too difficult. If the person is capable of meditating, then either the breath meditation or lovingkindness meditation should help, depending on whichever method is easier for him.

If we value happiness around us, then we should never reject such people, especially when we can do something to help them. Often, we might need to extend our hand of friendship out far enough and hold out our open hand long enough before we can warmly or healingly touch such a person. We are helping the willfully blind to see. Let our light gradually and gently open their eyes and light up their lives. At the same time, we need to smile in our hearts, too. For, such a smile lights up our faces.

38 Buddhism sets you free [R223]

Religion imprisons our minds with beliefs, dogmas, rituals and guilt. There are also religions that do not or dare not call themselves religion, understandably. But the demand for unquestioning faith is there all the same.

Call Buddhism what you like, but there is something about Buddhism that is truly rewarding if we keep an open mind. No, there is nothing to believe here. Many find this to be one of the hardest things to do. All right, we can say that Buddhism does begin with some kind of beliefs, such as keeping the moral precepts so that our body and speech are in order for the sake of a harmonious family and society. But these are not beliefs: they are universal truths that make human communion harmonious and fruitful.

Then there is Buddhist mind-training or meditation, which even other religions are now adopting. This is because it brings inner

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peace and clarity. Ultimately mental stillness has no label. In fact, this is what the Buddha of early Buddhism is trying to tell us: truth does not belong to any religion, nor to anyone. It is liberating like the fresh air and space around us.

There are also Buddhisms that call for mere faith, or some ritual. If these work for you, use them. At any time, you find that there is something simpler or better, have the courage to rise to it. Buddhism is about change, and change is occurring all the time if we carefully observe ourselves and things around us.

The Buddha's Buddhism teaches us to keep on letting go of beliefs once we understand them. It is like learning ABC: we first master them, and then learn to spell words and make sentences. Then we read interesting books, and even tell stories to others, and share with them the great wonders of learning.

Early Buddhism is about self-learning. It is like learning to walk: no one can walk for us. As toddlers, we crawled and tried to stand, we fell, stood again, and now we are walking effortlessly (until age catches up, that is).

Wisdom comes in a similar way. Our sufferings arose from various conditions we were not sure about, or we could not prevent them for some reason. But there is a lot to learn from our sufferings. First, we must accept that there is really no one to blame, except conditions: no sin, no fate, no demon, no God, no others. Study the conditions, and understand them, then we will be able to prevent such sufferings, or at least lessen their effects.

Religions that demand all kinds of beliefs and rituals are trying to own us. But such religions are nothing but cunning and desperate people who are trying to control our minds and use our bodies. If any beliefs do not benefit us (they usually don't), we should let them go. If we are not sure what the beliefs are about, it is not

38 Buddhism sets you free [R223]

benefitting us. The same with rituals: they should help bring some peace and wisdom to us. If not, we do not need to do them.

Beliefs and rituals are often nothing more than public relations and advertisements that money-priests use to hold their clientele and con the gullible. A belief often means something we are not sure about, and are not really helpful. If we care to recall our own past: it is a record of our abandoning belief after belief. That is how we grow, by shedding the onion-skins of beliefs when the sting of truth opens our eyes.

The rituals that religious professionals charge us for—such as funerals—can all be even more meaningfully done by us, our relatives and friends together. If we truly love the dearly departed, we should give him or her a truly loving friends' funeral. True and good rituals are not public show-offs of guilt or wealth, but a powerful gesture of the heart that feels for others and a good feeling for ourselves.

When Edward Bernays, the “father of public relations,” made a great fortune selling his ideas to corporations and politicians, it really benefitted no one except the corporations and politicians, and Bernays. People in the US were throwing their hard-earned cash into investments, making a lot of money, and living like intoxicated hamsters in the cage of pleasure and plenty. They were all heading for the Great Crash of 1929, the beginning of the 12-year Great Depression. They started blaming everyone else, except themselves.

Now, the religions are using Bernays' tricks in making us to feel guilty and sinful about ourselves as if we are not already suffering enough, and to desire for things (like heaven) that we do not need. Of course, these religions claim they have all the answers. But these are answers to problems that these religions themselves have conjured up.

Religion works best where ignorance and the class system prevail. Yet more evil had been done in the name of religion than much of

the rest of history put together. Religion burdens us with the greatest of sufferings when they try to define good and evil for us, even against our better judgement and common sense. The more powerful the religion the greater the damage.⁸⁶

Better than any religion is an open curiosity for the healing truth and liberating insight; a relentless questioning that only brings joy and peace of helpful answers that fruit in self-understanding. And the best person to examine and ask such questions is we ourselves. For, if we do not think for ourselves, we will lose our minds; if we stop feeling, then we are dead. The chains are mind-made, only the mind can break them.

39 True aspirations [R224]

Most of us forget our new year resolutions simply because they are made only once a year. Or, perhaps they are too difficult or too frivolous for us to take them seriously. After all, even as the years pass, like it or not, we have tasted a yearful of lessons, if we choose to reflect on them.

However, there are some universal resolutions that we can make every day of our lives, such as before turning in. These are failsafe resolutions reminding us that we are still an evolving process like the days we have been living: sometimes the sunrise is beautiful, sometimes not; sometimes the day is clear, sometimes not; sometimes the afternoon is cool, sometimes not; sometimes the evening is peaceful and night restful, sometimes not. But we pass through them all the same.

⁸⁶ See eg this documentary on church abuse of children: <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/sex-crimes-and-the-vatican/> & its transcript <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/panorama/5402928.stm>.

39 True aspirations [R224]

The great difference we can make is how we pass through our days. Here are five vital daily resolutions, reminders of the moment, that we can use to centre ourselves in the peaceful eye of life's storms.

"May I be well and happy!" Happiness does not always come to us. We need to invite it in to stay: I *want* to be well and happy, I *am* well and happy. Since the opposite statements work, too, we might as well keep in mind the positive ones. As we think, so we are.

The breath is the most precious thing we have. More correctly, we *are* our breath. If we breathe *happily*, we become happy; if we breathe *peacefully*, we are peaceful. We have learned to walk, but we might still need to learn to breathe, or to remember to truly breathe.

Breathe in, visualize the most beautiful place we have been to. Breathe out, picture the most wonderful people who have touched our lives.

"May all be well and happy!" Whomever we meet, even the unfriendly, we should welcome them into our hearts, "May you be well and happy!" It is written across our faces. People may not read or heed it at first, but this is how others' goodness can surprise us. Our lovingkindness is the key, the passepartout, to the door to true happiness.

"May the suffering be suffering-free!" We may not always be able to help others in need, but we can keep an open heart to them, wishing them well that they may quickly rise out of their difficulties and miseries. Often enough, we may be able to stretch our hands out in kindness and succour. This works best when we feel the joy of giving. For, such a peace builds up a firmer foundation for deeper meditative bliss and liberation.

"May the joyful ever joyful be!" Then there are those who seem to be better off than we are. For various good reasons, they are enjoy

ing great wealth, fame, power and goodness. Even if we think the reasons are not good enough, we must accept that jealousy does not help. For, our fortunes are outrageously uncertain, and the more we are preoccupied with them, the less satisfied we are with them—and ourselves.

For true happiness is not really in what we have, but in what we really are. A fulfilling life is to fully enjoy the moment. For, the past is gone, and the future never comes. If we are at peace with the moment as it arises, then we are wealthy beyond measure. For, the real meaning of “wealth” is a state of weal, being well. If we truly live now, then we have freed the past and tamed the future.

“Whatever good we do will fruit in time.” Our greatest weakness is a moral one, that is, to think that there is no point in doing any good. The second weakness is to think that we can be happy only by and for ourselves. And thirdly, that we can be forever happy with the world. The world—what our senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) create and sustain for us—is ever shifting. The world is time and space: we have *been* all these years, we have *moved* far distances to come to the here and now. Yet, the moment I say this, it is gone. We have changed, and we will continue to change.

Goodness is basically an understanding and acceptance that change is about becoming better. Even if there are hiccups and upheavals in between, the ground will level again if we work at it. We are capable of great healing and goodness. The sky is not the limit, our heart is. A loveless heart, a hating mind, is small and limiting. A loving heart, an open mind, is capable of boundless truth, beauty and peace. That is why we love the beautiful.

40 Falling in love, staying in love [R225]

For any relationship, especially marriage, partnership and friendship, to work we need two basic ingredients: lovingkindness and

compassion. Relationship means, or should mean, the willingness to see something likeable and workable in one another despite the differences and difficulties.

This is not always easy because we are *individuals*, meaning that we have our own ideas about life and things. Since an individual is someone who, as a rule, thinks for himself or herself, there will often be differences in opinions. We often have differing likes and dislikes. This is what makes us human.

A successful relationship then begins with our willingness and ability to set aside, at least temporarily, our likes and dislikes, and to try to think and feel like the other person. When this acceptance goes both ways, then we have a working, even wholesome, relationship.

When we understand and accept this human divergence—that we are individuals with our own thinking and feelings—then our marriage, partnership or friendship is very likely to work. A stronger person may want to have his way: this is the “power” mode. Sometimes this may work, especially when this is beneficial for both sides. But the “love” mode works better when it involves both parties: two hearts are better than one.

A truly stronger person is one who understands why he or she has to accept a spouse, partner or friend as he or she really is. In fact, all happy relationships begin in this way. We “fall in love” with what we see desirable in another. The task now is to “stay in love,” that is, to keep gazing on the good qualities of the other person despite everything else.

Relationships fail when there is too much measuring against one another. Love is a feeling, and therefore cannot be measured. It is not helpful to say, for example, who loves whom *more*. At best, we can only say how much or how well we *outwardly* show our love for one another.

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For, love is not love till we show it. Since the other person is not a mind-reader (a helpful assumption), we need at least occasionally, and as spontaneously as possible, to express an appreciation of the other person. A bell is not a bell till we ring it.

Love can be learned, and needs to be learned. In fact, courtship is a vital process of learning how to love. Even if a courtship fails, no one has failed: it simply means that there are not enough connecting tissues of common emotions to hold the two people together.

Break-ups are generally less painful for a courting couple than for a married couple. In fact, the first courtships may not always be successful. Yet we learn more from failure than we do from success. More realistically, we can say that we have not failed: we have not yet found the right partner.

We need to examine what went wrong and what we can do about it in a wholesome way. Since we are all evolving beings, love is itself a learning process, especially after marriage. For, if we see marriage as a life-long continuing education in loving, we are likely to be good students.

Another vital concept to the understanding of a working relationship is that of *conditionality*. We are defined and propelled by two kinds of conditions: internal and external. Internal conditions are how we think and feel. External conditions are the personality (thinking and feelings) of the other person, as well as various social conditions (family, society, work, finance, etc).

In other words, there is no *one*, no *one* cause, to be blamed when a relationship fails. It is the result of many conditions. As such, it is wise to watch out for such conditions and prevent them from affecting our relationship. Or when such conditions do arise and momentarily trouble our relationship, we need to reflect what we can learn from them, and how we can together work around them.

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A relationship is more likely to work when both sides, or even one side, were to see the advantages of working *together*. In other words, we are able to see a bigger picture: that we are more than mere bodies. There must also be a touching of hearts and overlapping of vision.

Imagine: what can two loving hearts do together that can also benefit others. Such a shared higher goal might begin with something as basic as supporting one another, or raising children, but it can become more inclusive, more deepening in spirit. Indeed, the more our mutual love can accept others, especially the less fortunate, the more meaningful we will see our relationship, as it is valuable to others, too.

A relationship may be a life-time enterprise, but a life-time is a blink in cosmic time. We are like the little black and white points of light of these words we are now reading. This contrast becomes letters and words, little cells of sounds and meanings that embrace one another to form a bigger picture that benefits the reader.

Our relationship is, above all, a learning process. Far from being a single human process, it is only a beginning of an interbeing, a common and connected life-quest. How well we can get along with others reflects how well we can get along with ourselves. How well we understand ourselves is reflected in how well we love and treat others. Our love defines how those around us evolve with us.

To love is to accept others as they are; at least to begin there. Just as we would like others to accept us just as we are, we need to accept others as they are, too. In fact, it is easier if we initiate this process: this is how we make friends. That is why we look in the eye of those we love or accept. We need to “see” others as they are: we need to look deep into them and see them as we see ourselves.

It strengthens us in a powerful way if we are willing and able to see that what we do not like in others is only a reflection of something

about ourselves that we do not like. We must spend some time reflecting on this point since we need to truly feel beyond the words. A hint here is *compassion*, that is, kindness shown even to those who do not deserve it.

We might think that we hate “someone,” but hating is merely a condition of our life: it is within us, a matter of the heart. If it is “someone” that we hate, that hate would disappear as soon that “someone” is gone. If we carry this hate around inside us, surely it is a part of us. We do not deserve this hate. Show it compassion: let it go.

41 Truly renouncing [R226]

The core practice of early Buddhism is renunciation, that is, the letting go and cutting off of unwholesome states of mind so that we become liberated individuals. From the early texts, we know that there are two ways: renouncing as a monastic and practising meditation as a lay person.

True renunciation depends on the commitment of the monastic or the lay person to Dharma training. Living as a monastic, truly keeping to the Vinaya, is like taking the high road to nirvana. On the other hand, the laity would mostly take what might be said to be the good old country road, hilly and winding but a pleasant journey, much slower, but capable of reaching the same goal.

As a rule, those who take the monastic course should be serious meditators, those we are unlikely to chat with online, but have to meet personally for any useful spiritual training. Such monastic meditators are the dhyana-attainers. Attaining dhyana means they have transcended the limits of the five physical senses and have tasted pure mental pleasure.

This is as if we have graduated with a PhD; so philosophy 101 is a breeze; or we have the very first mint issue of Action Comics #1

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(June 1939) worth US\$1.5 million, so we would not think much of the newsstand copies.

Even if we do not work for PhDs, we could still graduate as good teachers. Even if we do not collect all the first editions of comics or books, we could still enjoy reading them. In fact, most of us could easily afford newsstand comics, rather than collector's editions. The Buddhist lay life, then, is a fun life, like playing football. Football is not merely kicking the ball about, but it is the football rules that make it fun. The Buddhist lay life is defined by the five precepts, which keep us on the human level, so that we can direct our energies to mental cultivation or meditation.

Meditation is here best understood as progressive renunciation. When we seriously make an effort to meditate, we are effectively getting into the state of a renunciant. The very first thing we do in meditation is to find a conducive place and sit as comfortably as we can so that we can forget about our body after a while. This is a bodily renunciation.

After sitting for some time, we might begin to feel some discomfort. Again here, we should simply ignore it if possible. Otherwise, try to observe with an open mind, "What is this pain?" We would notice that it is a process of rising and falling of feeling. If we do not let our negative mind to return and colour the pain, then this is a feeling renunciation.

Once we are physically comfortable, we go on to work with our thoughts as they arise. The usual way is to simply ignore them and keep our focus on the meditation object (say, the breath or loving-kindness). If thoughts do arise, it is best to simply let them come and let them go. Never follow them. If we can do this comfortably over time, then this is a mental renunciation.

Another kind of renunciation is that of directed blissful feeling or an experience of some mental brightness, often known as "the sign"

(*nimitta*). This sort of feeling or experience, if it is truly blissful, should be silently enjoyed for as long as we like. When we feel some sense of familiarity with it, then it is time to let it go gently, so that a higher state would arise. This is a higher renunciation.

Finally, when we are fully free of bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings, we might go on to attain deep concentration, even *dhyana*. Then, whether we are monastic or lay, we have truly “renounced the world.” This is true renunciation.⁸⁷

If we patiently bear the initial pains of starting meditation, the fruits will come in due course. Good meditation begins by a total acceptance of ourselves just as we are. Then we leave the past where it should be, and we do not cross the bridge of the future until we reach it. Good meditation empowers us to renounce the pains of the past—they are gone; it teaches us to renounce the future—it never comes. We have a good sense of what needs to be rightly done now.

In our practice, we must gently keep bringing the mind back to the meditation-object, and constantly extend the horizon of our loving-kindness. We are laying the foundations of emotional strength. We grow emotionally stronger by first identifying and overcoming our inner weaknesses, our negative emotions. Then we work on discovering our positive emotions, or inner resilience by recalling happy memories and focusing on positive actions. We constantly remind ourselves that whichever way our lives go, people change and they may not be always there for us, and that things, too, are not always what they seem to be.

In other words, what we really are—the truth about ourselves—is not *out* there or in what we *have*. Our true being lies in what we really *are*. Just as the sun and its light are not two separate things,

⁸⁷ This reflection is based on Piya Tan, *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1.

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even so our life and love cannot be separated. Thinking makes it so. The examined life is the one that truly feels: we do not *think* happy, we *feel* happy. Happiness is a direct experience of true reality: it is to see ourselves as a word embracing other words on this page, completing what needs to be said here.

As our inner happiness grows, we need less worldliness, less religion: we no more need any parent-figure or guru-figure, or any kind of power-figure. Our locus of control stays *within* us: we become emotionally self-reliant, without any need for the approval of others, or any measuring ourselves against others. Yet our happiness is capable of inspiring happiness in others. We have a clear vision of our true self and liberation.⁸⁸

42 Driving meditation [R227]

As I do not drive, kind friends would often ferry me around to classes and talks, and back. This reflection recalls such journeys and some wise words from another friend. This reflection is also a gesture of deep joyful appreciation for you who have offered me the gift of being transported in comfort for the sake for inner peace.

A car has **four wheels**, but they all work together to go in one direction. The true wheels in our lives are the four noble truths: the true model for ultimate problem solving. First, we identify and define what is really troubling us. Second, we look for the conditions that bring it about. Third, we envision a problem-free situation. And fourth, we apply ourselves to attaining that problem-free goal. Whenever we fail, or are not sure, we ask: What do we do next?

Prayer should not merely be a “spare tyre” that we pull out when we have a puncture. It should be a “steering wheel” with which we

⁸⁸ See SD 17.8c: (8.4) Downside of meditation (the danger of cults); (8.5) Who should not meditate.

carefully keep ourselves on the right path as we move through life. This is the wheel of truth, our Dharma,cakra. The best prayer is a silent one filling our body and mind with lovingkindness so that others feel it, too. Such a prayer asks for nothing, yet gives every goodness without any condition.

Worrying about tomorrow only takes away today's peace. Regretting about the past only turns us away from this moment's opportunity. If we keep thinking that someone has hurt or harmed us, we are only carrying him around in our lives: what a burden! People can only hurt what we *have*; they can never hurt what we *are*. If our pride is hurt, it is because we have it. It is the pride that is hurting; so let the pride go; let us accept ourselves unconditionally, just as we are. To move on is to let go of the past. This is the beginning of true renunciation.

Notice how large a car's **windshield** is, and how small a rear-mirror is. We need to spend as much time as possible looking ahead and keep moving on. Occasionally, we might look back into the rear-mirror of the past, but only if this helps up to move safely on. Sometimes, we might have to stop, even let others move ahead of us so that the path is clear and safe for us. Sometimes we might fall back, or go in a circle. As long as we keep moving on, even slowly, we will reach our goal.

Everything in life is **impermanent**. Even people we love, and friends, come and go, and cannot always be the way we want them to be. They are like the traffic ahead and that passes us by. Since we are on the road, we must watch the traffic. If the road is good and clear, enjoy it, for it will not last forever. If the way is jammed, or we have lost our way, keep a patient look-out. It does not go on forever.

Friends, like **books**, should be few and good. Even if we might not have the time or inclination to read through every book or even through a single book, especially when they are very thick and

42 Driving meditation [R227]

deep, we could still surprise ourselves with its wisdom, when we leisurely browse through one, or open and read a random page. Friendship is like a book: it takes but a moment to burn it, but years and sometimes tears to write one.

Old friends are like good wine. The older they are, the sweeter they taste. Yet there must be some space amongst us. For, too much wine might intoxicate and blur us. Even the best of friends must at times be apart. The moments of silence in our friendship allows our words to be clearly and truly heard. Even the best of friends must part, so let us treasure the moment with love and respect. Yet true friends never say goodbye: we wish one another farewell, till we meet again.

Our **eyes** alone, no matter how good, do not make a good driver. If we do not look at the road or where we are really going, we are as good as being blind. We all have eyes but not always vision. We might travel the world and visit great places and see great sights, but without a proper purpose in life, we would keep coming back to the same spot. A good sense of direction in life is not found by looking outside, nor by looking up, nor looking down, but by looking *within*, by diligently making the journey to inner peace.

43 Minding change, changing mind [R228]

As long as we see a need to know the truth, to understand things as they really are, there is a place in our lives for the Buddha's teaching. We all need to awaken to true reality, so that, untroubled by greed, hate and delusion, we are able to bring true happiness and security to others, too.

The greatest challenge to being a true Buddhist is our own ideas of ourselves. Such a self-view is often conditioned by culture (how we behave and speak as a race), childhood (family conditioning and peer influence), work (which we do most of our able waking life),

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religion (like going to a missionary school), or simply comparing ourselves to others (like thinking that to be rich and successful are blessings from some higher power).

Despite such challenges, more and more people of different religions are finding Buddhism more meaningful and naturally feel it as a part of their lives. We often find something in Buddhism, especially its teachings of compassion and forgiveness, very healing. However, if we are very new to Buddhism, we might still be unsure of a lot of things about it. Our understanding of Buddhism might still be weak. There are a number of reasons that we might be weak Buddhists, for example,

- We may be infants in Dharma (infants are weak).
- We may be sick or diseased (by legalism).
- We may be malnourished (from lack of good Dharma).
- We may lack exercise (we need fellowship).

We might be new to the Buddha's teaching, like newly arrived in a strange foreign place. Since we are not sure of our directions, we simply follow what others tell us. Even then, we often do not hear the directions clearly, or we often misunderstand them. We might keep on going in circles, or move farther away from our true destination.

However, if we are true to ourselves, we will realize that we are lost. But if we keep on moving, we would somehow reach our goal, even if this takes some time. We must go on asking questions about our motives in being religious, and be courageous to question others, especially the preachers and teachers.

Infants are also very self-centred or narcissistic: they need to be, because they are helpless, and need to cry for attention to themselves for their own survival. We sometimes find Buddhism a good way of getting attention from others. Yet we are not always infants. We can grow out of the craving for self-attention, by really caring for others,

43 Minding change, changing mind [R228]

which means showing lovingkindness, especially to those close to us and those whom we work with.

To the best way to grow spiritually, is to be willing and able to let go of our old views and past conditionings, even temporarily, and listen to our hearts. There is always something to learn from listening. That is why the Buddha's saints are called "listeners."

Being "sick or diseased" here means that as Buddhists or truth-seekers, we might be too careful so as not to make any mistakes in our practice. Or, we fear that we might break any of the precepts. For example, we feel that being a vegetarian is the best way of keeping the first precept, which is actually true in some ways. However, we need to carefully examine the Suttas and related learning for the real reasons and purposes for such conduct.

Or, we could be taking the Dharma too literally, word for word, without examining the proper context and meaning behind the words. The problem with taking Buddhism, or any religion, at its mere word, is that different people understand the words differently. That is why even in the same religion, there are many sects and groups.

This is also true of Buddhism, which is 2600 years old. It has spread to various countries, and changed into many new Buddhisms. We might mistake what is cultural or ethnic to be more important than the actual teaching itself. Or, we are simply shopping for something that suits our pet views or plans. Or, we merely want to be part of a group and be accepted by others. The best reason for learning Buddhism is for our own inner peace and true happiness.

We might begin learning about Buddhism from books, the internet, or from well known speakers. Everyone has their opinion on Buddhism. Yet Buddhism, like our breath, is a very personal thing. First, it is about keeping our body and speech wholesome: we begin by

respecting our body and being harmonious in our communication with others.

Next, we should spend some time examining and reflecting on the true teaching of the Buddha himself. This is the best place to begin because it goes right to the point, without the squint of later biases, strange rituals and cultural baggages. These early teachings or the Suttas also give us very clear and simple teachings on mental cultivation. When we are well informed on the Buddha's Dharma, we are better prepared to recognize helpful teachings and teachers, and recognize our own weaknesses before it is too late.

As Buddhists, we are our own best teachers. We need to do three basic things for ourselves, and only *we* can do this ourselves.

(1) We need to know our own mind for what it really is: this is the beginning of self-knowing. Notice how quickly our mind thinks and changes its ideas and feelings. Views can change, and are meant to change.

(2) We need to train our mind to be less lustful, less hateful, less fearful and less deluded. A good way to do this is to constantly reflect that our mind and body are *impermanent*. Occasionally, simply clear the mind of all ideas and views, and notice how peaceful it is.

(3) We need to free our mind by less believing, towards more knowing, to even more feeling. To simply *believe* is to walk in the dark. To *know* is to turn on the light and look around. Then, to *feel*: to know what is just right to do next. This is called directly knowing.

Such a constant personal training helps us think better. This means that our ideas no more control us, but we decide what to do with our ideas. This is a very vital early training that we need. If we neglect this, then our thoughts would seem to take lives of their own,

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so that we begin to believe they are actually real and out there. This is called dementia.⁸⁹

44 Knowledge limits, vision frees [R229]

Some religions seem to hold the view that woman is punished for her disobedience of God, such as eating a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, tempted by a talking serpent. We also see a similar idea about woman in Confucianism which teaches the three subordinations or “respects” regarding a woman, that is, as a child she must obey her parent, as an adult her husband, and in old age her son. In such systems, sexuality measures and limits, even stunts, the individual.

In the Saññoga Sutta (the Discourse on Bondage), however, the Buddha wisely tells us that if we see ourselves merely as sexual beings, then we are condemned, as it were, to seek our missing halves, looking for self-fulfillment outside of ourselves. The Buddha exhorts us to rise above our sexuality: we are more than merely sexual beings, mere bodies.⁹⁰ We can be liberated beings.

What the Buddha says here in plain language, the Bible retells in mythical language. Adam, before his “fall,” is, in a sense, neither male nor female. It is only after Eve is created from one of Adam’s ribs (another origin story for woman’s subordination to man), that they, after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, know themselves as sexual beings. Thus far, the mythic parallel flows.

As regards serpents, Indian religions, on the other hand, have respect and love for snakes, indeed, for all living beings. We might

⁸⁹ See also “Preventing dementia,” R213: no 28 above.

⁹⁰ **Saññoga Sutta** (A 7.48), SD 8.7: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/8.7-Sannoga-S-a7.48-piya.pdf>.

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even say that snakes are sacred in Indian mythology. During the sixth week after his awakening, the Buddha, it is said, is sheltered from a raging storm by a serpent king who coils himself seven times around the Buddha and spreads his hood above him.

After the storm, the serpent uncoils himself, changes into a handsome youth and bows reverently before the Buddha. In Buddhist mythology, such serpents dwell deep under the waters and underground (our unconscious, if you like). His youth represents wisdom (the truth is timeless) and his beauty compassion. This vision apparently evolved into the Mahayana image of Manjushri, the embodiment of wisdom, whose emblem is a blazing sword that cuts through ignorance and burns away defilements.

Buddhism is rich with such images because it is easier to *see* wisdom and *visualize* reality, than merely to talk or know about them. We are easily lost in words and lost for them, when we try to define wisdom and reality. Wisdom and reality are best *seen* for ourselves.

The truth of seeing is no less beautiful in our daily lives. We might *know* our loved ones: our partner, our spouse, our children, our pets. But merely to know them is never sufficient: we never tire of *seeing* them. Our vision of them is always endearing. When we truly love another, we feel that the sight of a beloved is much more than all there is to know about that beloved.

If we truly love others in a spiritual sense, even if we know of that person's faults, we never see them so. For, we see the whole person, his full being. We know that people will change, love and wisdom change people for the better. Wisdom is the seeing of the whole person as a reflection of all life.

The errors and deficiencies of our ways might be compared to the ferocity of beasts: violent and destructive when untamed. Yet, when properly tamed, such animals can be of great service to mankind,

and even live comfortably comforting the humans who own them as pets.

Notice how we befriend a shy cat. We would simply squat nearby, making some gentle cat sound and stretching out an open hand to it. As the cat sees us so, we gently shuffle closer, until within reach of it. As soon as we are near enough, we would at once grasp the cat firmly by the scruff with one hand, and gently scratch its head or chin with the other. Before we know it, the cat would be purring and following us home.

Making friends with humans, too, begins with just looking at them with gentle and kindly eyes, as the suttas say.⁹¹ A gentle smile and a slight nod help, too. It is then, we would approach that person and say something appropriate to the occasion. Then we introduce ourselves and follow with a handshake. Compare such a “seeing” with an unmeeting “knowing” of someone online: we are not really friends in the latter.

Similarly, we might know all there is to know about a sunrise or a sunset, even take pictures and movies of them. However, they are still not the real direct experience—the joy, peace and fullness of actually *watching* a sunrise or a sunset. To see, as such, is also to be present, and to watch the present, the moment of reality, and to do so with joy.

We might talk about salvation and peace, even about eternal life and heaven. Yet, if we “see” not our breath, and *feel* not its peace, our knowledge of the highest things is all in vain. We might not see our breath the way we see our face in a mirror, with open eyes. Our breath can be seen only with the *closed* eyes of a peaceful mind in

⁹¹ See eg **Bahu,vedaniya Sutta** (M 59) & **Dhammacetiya Sutta** (M 89), also at SD 34.1(6.3).

meditation. When we are in the deepest bliss of our hearts, the breath becomes one with our mind, and this oneness floods our being as a light so radiant as none other. We have truly seen the light, yet unblinded. And by that light, we truly see all.

Any religion or system that disallows us from seeing truth and reality for ourselves, probably fears that we would find our way out of the prison of those blinded by the light. None are so blind as those who would not see, to see reality yet not know it.

Notice how the eyes close when we sleep. The sleep of ignorance closes our eyes even in the clearest of day. Yet, when we know that we are thus asleep, we are ready to awake. We must open our own eyes; we can never really see through the eyes of another.

To truly know good, we must see good. To awaken is to see goodness in our own hearts, and to feel this goodness in others, too. We would truly see and love goodness when we see it in ourselves. For, to truly see goodness is to know that we are not alone in good. It uplifts us above our selves to become a most precious jewel amongst other jewels, each reflecting the light of the rest, spanning all reality. For this reason, a liberated awakened person is said to have both “knowledge and vision.”

45 Everything is beautiful—really? [R230]

There are two extremes in religion or ways of life today. One extreme is a religion that tells you exactly what to believe or else you would be punished in some eternal way, like being sent to hell or kept out of the group or tribe. The other extreme is a teaching where anything seems to go. Here, there is neither right nor wrong, neither good nor bad. It all depends on how we think, so it seems. The first holds us in a prison of faith, while the second in a prison of words.

45 Everything is beautiful—really? [R230]

The middle way is to learn to think for ourselves, and to trust ourselves. We might start off believing in a religion or living a certain way. As we mature, we somehow feel that something is still missing in our lives despite all the prayer, fellowship, success and happiness. Very often we are held back in a life-style because we are used to a routine of bonds with people we have known so well. Then, one day, we realize that we are really different deep inside. Something is not right.

Most of us might just peer through this little crack in the cocoon of faith and friendship, and then get pulled back into its inner safety, or the little crack gets quickly sealed up again, and we are back in our familiar routine. We have not really changed or grown in any way. We might not even know this.

One of the most important western philosophers, Plato (429-347 BCE), who gave us Socrates' teachings, illustrates this human predicament (in Book 7 of *The Republic*) with his famous parable of the cave. Plato likens those who do not know reality to prisoners chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads. All they can see is the wall of the cave. Behind them burns a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet, along which puppeteers can walk. The puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects, that pass behind them. What the prisoners see and hear are merely shadows and echoes made by objects that they do not see.⁹²

A famous Australian Buddhist monk, Brahmavamso,⁹³ echoes this parable in his teachings, and on which I here elaborate. A group of

⁹² S Marc Cohen, 2002:

<http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/cave.htm>

⁹³ Brahmavamso, "Paṭicca-samuppāda: Dependent origination." *Dhamma Journal* 4,2 July 2003:49-83. See <http://www.what-buddha-taught->

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people, it is said, are born in a harsh prison on an isolated island. They are raised in that prison, and have spent all their lives there so that they know only prison life. They don't even suspect that anything beyond their prison can exist. So they make the best of the island prison.

Those who think positively, because they have gone to prison seminars, begin to think that the harsh prison is really a wonderful place. They even compose songs like "All jails bright and beautiful ...the good Lord made them all!"

Others get involved in social service, joyfully and compassionately decorating the prison cells of others. When someone gets punished or tortured in jail, they think something has gone wrong and look for some reason or someone to blame.

If someone suggests that it is the very nature of the prison to be suffering, they are dismissed as a pessimist and told to "Get a life!" They are reminded how beautiful the trees, fruits and crops on the prison island are, and the various animals they could catch and eat any time they want to; and the beautiful beaches and lagoon are full of fish and beautiful corals. Although they never see the sun rising, the sun-set is often beautiful, especially when the weather is good. This is truly paradise, so they think.

Now, there are high walls and fences around the prison on the island. The lagoon on the unfenced side of the prison is shallow, but beyond that, the waters are deep and treacherous, infested, it is said, with terrible man-eating demons and sea-monsters. On land, all around, there are thick jungle and high mountains separating this prison from the eastern side of the island. No one is allowed to even talk about what lies beyond the jungle and mountains. So to the prison folks, there is no world or life beyond their paradise prison.

net/Books3/Ajahn_Brahm_Paticca_samuppada_Dependent_Origination.htm.

45 Everything is beautiful—really? [R230]

One full moon night, a prisoner discovers a raft, complete with four oars, on the lagoon. He has never seen such a strange object, but with three other friends, they quickly learn how to use the raft. It is simply exhilarating. The night is so peaceful, the sky winking at them with countless bright stars. In the rhythm of the paddling, the watery swishes, and the salty sea smell, they could hear their own gentle breaths, zestful with anticipation over what lies beyond. Yet everything seems to be so profoundly peaceful, something they have never felt before.

As day breaks, they see the sun rising above the horizon—they have never seen a light so beautiful. Following the coastline, they reach the eastern shore. To their surprise, there are many other people like them there. These friendly natives welcome them, feed them and chatted with them as new friends.

Nearby, on the waters, the four friends see canoes, yachts, and even ships, with people coming and going in them. When they ask what is going on, the natives laughingly tell them these vessels take them wherever they want to go. There are so many other islands, even a large continent over the horizon; so many beautiful places to visit and live in. They are free to travel wherever they want.

As the day passes, the four friends almost forget about their prison home, but feel compelled to return, as they feel the things are so new and unfamiliar in the new world. So they paddle back into the night, heading for their prison home. As they paddle, a heavy feeling overcomes them, as if leaving behind something really wonderful. Their hearts become heavier as they come nearer the shore. They are now convinced that the prison is really suffering.

As soon as they meet the other inmates, they tell them about the new found land. Most don't believe them. They can't imagine anything other than their prison. When they say that the prison is suf

fering and freedom is happiness, they are piously accused by the prison wardens of escapism and warned of the sea-demons.

In fact, the prison wardens are so worried that they fence off the lagoon from the sea. The prisoners are allowed to swim or paddle their boats in the lagoon, but only under the wardens' watchful eyes. In the dark of night, however, one or two of them, some say, sometimes small groups, quietly paddle away through a remote unfenced neck of the lagoon and head for the free new world.

46 Even a donkey can be wise⁹⁴ [R231]

One day, a farmer's old donkey (or ass) fell down into a well. He brayed loudly and piteously as the farmer tried to figure out what to do. Finally, he decided that the animal was old and useless, and the well needed to be covered up anyway.

The farmer called out to his workers and neighbours to help him. With shovels and hoes, they began to throw dirt into the well to fill it up. At first, the donkey panicked and brayed even more loudly.

Then, to everyone's amazement, he stopped braying. Thinking it was dead, the people shovelled and pushed the dirt harder and faster into the wall, to make sure that the carcass was well covered up. Moreover, it was getting dark, and they hurried up to finish the task.

Finally, the farmer and his workers could hear that the dirt level was well near the top, so that they were close to covering up the well. When he stopped work for a moment to look at the well, he was shocked to see a dark shape standing where the well was. It was the donkey!

⁹⁴ The modern fable is found in a number of places on the Internet, but is here retold as a personal problem-solver.

46 Even a donkey can be wise [R231]

He had been shaking off all the dirt as it fell on his back, and stepping on it. As the level of dirt quickly rose, so too did the donkey reach nearer the top of the well. Finally, when he was near enough to the opening, he exerted all his strength, despite his age. His will to live did the rest. As soon as he came out of the well, he happily trotted off into the dark, hee-hawing happily away into the silent distance, never to return.⁹⁵

This story may mean different things to different people. The basic idea is that in a difficult situation, if we examine it carefully, we would find a way out. Don't fight it, but work with it, as it were. A problem is simply an opinion about a difficulty before us. The solution begins with thinking rightly about it. Since it is an opinion, we can at any time change it, and re-look at the whole situation again, and again, until we know just what to do.

While a problem might seem to involve an external situation that seems to be beyond our control, we can decide how to think about it. Here are four guidelines on how to do this:

(1) When people need help – Give

People always need some kind of help, whether they know it or not. The best help we can give others is by being kind to them, at least to communicate happily with them. Very often, it is not *what* help we give, but *how* we give it that counts. Material gifts have a limited life-span, but when we touch the lives of others, it is forever, as it were.

⁹⁵ A humorous version of this story adds that the donkey, angry at the farmer's unkindness, bit him as soon as he got out of the well. Moral: *When you've done a wrong and try to cover up your ass, it might come back to bite you.*

The best gift we can give here is perhaps by listening wisely. Carefully listen to what the person has to say. At the right time, we can apply “the four-step problem-solving” method:

- (a) ask him to clearly define how he feels;
- (b) ask why he feels that way;
- (c) invite him to look at all the possible scenarios or alternatives available to him;
- (d) help him to work out a clear guideline for action.

(2) When we fail – Forgive

Often enough, we feel that we have failed, or that we are not good enough. We should apply the same “four-step problem-solving” method here. Ask ourselves what exactly is troubling us. Define the problem, the “enemy” is clearly seen: what is seen is easier to deal with.

Next, we should ask why we feel this way. Is it because we are comparing ourselves to someone else (or perhaps because of something someone said to us)? If we take someone else as our standard of happiness, we are looking away from our own hearts wherein lie the roots of our problems and their solutions.

Even when we feel that we have really failed, things are never as bad as we make them to be. To admit failure, even privately, is to begin to work out of it. We need to carefully reflect on these four questions. *Where did we really fail? Why did we fail? What should we have done? What have we learned from this failure?*

Spend quiet time alone in a peaceful place that you like. Sit quietly and recall a very happy moment in your life (such as a very happy event, or a beautiful place you have been to). Once you feel some level of joy, let go of the images. Now tell yourself, “I forgive myself completely. I accept myself unconditionally.” Go on repeating this

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until it becomes natural to you. In time, you will see the value of this unconditional self-acceptance.

(3) When others fail us -- Forget

No matter how kind others may be to us, they cannot always help us in every way. They have their lives, their inclinations, and limited resources. Just as we are, so are they. As we know people better, this understanding deepens.

Sometimes some people can be really nasty to us, or are very uncar-ing. Again, we cannot always know all the true reasons for this. Even if we do know the reasons, and cannot do anything about it (at least for the moment), we must forget such negative aspects of others. The rule is simple: just as we want others not to remember our failures, so too we should not remember theirs.

Make extra effort to remember the goodness of others. When we have a chance to chat with them, we can then do so positively. Our relationships with people, even the worst of them, can change for the better – if we allow time to heal. Once the event is over, it should be left in the past. Notice how our views of the past change with time. The secret is to look at it with lovingkindness, no matter what.⁹⁶

(4) When the situation seems bad -- Forbear

We all at some point want to change the world, or see it change. Yet we would change our minds in time. Imagine if everyone's prayers were answered! The world would simply be devastated. The point is that we might not be able to change the world, but we can change

⁹⁶ In this connection, see **Āghāta Paṭivīnaya Sutta** (A 5.162). SD 39.6.

our view of it. Or better, we can change our selves: for, we are the real world.⁹⁷

So we need to give, forgive, forget, and forbear, each in its own time. Meantime, *when life shovels dirt upon us, let us plant flowers and fruits.*

47 Asking the right questions⁹⁸ [R232]

Although early Buddhism has one of the largest canonical scriptures in religious history, encompassing a wide range of human knowledge and experiences, the Buddha has only one clear and consistent message in his teachings. It is for the sake of spiritual awakening and liberation of all living beings (not just humans).

The Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta (M 63), the Shorter Discourse to Māluṅkyā,putta, is a clear statement on why the Buddha does not explain matters that are not connected with the spiritual path and goal, namely, the ending of suffering.⁹⁹ Like the parable of the raft,¹⁰⁰ the parable of the poisoned dart in the Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta shows the spiritual pragmatism of early Buddhism.¹⁰¹

The Buddha does not answer Māluṅkyā,putta's questions regarding the ten "unexplained" or "undetermined" (*avyākata*) theses¹⁰² for

⁹⁷ See "Worlds of our own" (R115), *Simple Joys 2: Healing Words*, 2011: no 13; & "We are the world" (R195): see no 9 above.

⁹⁸ This reflection is an expansion on **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta** (M 63) @ SD 5.8 (1).

⁹⁹ M 63 = SD 5.8.

¹⁰⁰ M 22.13 = SD 3.13.

¹⁰¹ M 63.5.2 = SD 5.8.

¹⁰² The 10 undeterminable questions: the first 4 are about whether the physical universe is eternal or not, and finite or infinite; the next 2, about whether the soul is identical with the body or separate; and the last 4 whe-

two reasons. Firstly, they are not connected with the spiritual path and goal. In fact, such speculations distract us from our spiritual development and liberation. Secondly, these theses are, by their very nature, unanswerable—they are *questions wrongly put*.¹⁰³ To answer either “yes” or “no” to any of such questions is to accept them as valid when they are really not.

This is like our answering “yes” or “no” to a question such as “Where does fire go when it is extinguished?” as shown in **the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72). There, the Buddha reminds us that such a question does “not apply,” it is “wrongly put” (*na upeti*).¹⁰⁴ **Rupert Gethin** in his *Foundations of Buddhism* gives a modern example: If we answer “‘yes’ or ‘no’ to a question such as ‘Are Martians green?’” we are inevitably “drawn into accepting the validity of the question” (1998:68).

A similar type of trick question is called the “double-horned question” (*ubhato,koṭṭika pañha*) or dilemma (where answering either way would bring an unwelcome conclusion), and as such does not have a definite or “one-sided” (*ekamsa*) answer, as recounted in **the Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 58).¹⁰⁵ In **the (Asibandhaka,putta) Kulā Sutta** (S 42.9), however, the Buddha answers the two-horned question proposed by the Nirganthas (the Jains), simply by declaring to them that it is a trick question!¹⁰⁶

ther, after death, a liberated saint exists, does not exist, both, or neither. See SD 5.8 (2).

¹⁰³ Cf U 66. See **The Buddha’s silence**, SD 44.1; also Intro to **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 58), SD 7.12.

¹⁰⁴ M 72.19/1:487 = SD 6.15.

¹⁰⁵ M 58.6/1:393 f = SD 7.12.

¹⁰⁶ S 42.9/4:322-325 = SD 7.11. In **Milinda,pañha**, too, the double-horned question is used skillfully by way of Buddhist apologetics. See also Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 334 f, 350-352.

Nowadays, we often meet with zealous religious missionaries who try to trick us into being a captive audience to discuss “what do you think of my saviour?” Whether we reply that we accept or reject him, we are tricked into chatting with the missionary trained in sophistry (playing with words) and casuistry (playing with reasoning). The best response to such questions is to reject them and leave them unanswered, that is, to say, “Excuse me, I don’t feel like talking with you. Thank you.” This certainly keeps our hearts more healthy.

However, when an honest seeker questions us about religious matters, asking, for example, “What is life? What is the purpose of life? Why is life so full of suffering? What is happiness?” we should not jump right away into giving an answer. We should first know *why* the person is asking. What is really troubling the person? Perhaps, the question needs to be rephrased and be more clear. We could even ask, “Why are you asking this question?” When the question is rightly put, we are in a better position to explore it, and come to some usual understanding, even if we do not agree on a common answer.

The Buddha’s not answering the “ten questions” does not mean that he lacks the knowledge of the answers. On the contrary, the Buddha’s knowledge is direct and vast: we might say that he fully understands what is going on after experiencing life hands-on, that is, he has both knowledge and vision (*ñāṇa, dassana*).

In **the Sīmsapā Sutta** (S 56.31), the Buddha declares that what he knows through self-knowledge is as great as the amount of leaves in the simsapa forest, but he has not taught these things “because they are not connected with the goal, not connected with the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to nirvana.” What he has

47 Asking the right questions [R232]

fully and clearly taught us, that is, the four noble truths, are sufficient for self-awakening.¹⁰⁷

There is so much we know about the world today, and so much information, good and bad, useful and useless, is easily and freely available today. Religion, too, is easily available from books, the Internet, and the numerous religious centres and speakers. An important point to remember here is that whatever we hear or receive from others, no matter how knowledgeable or respectable or powerful, are at best *opinions*, that is, another's view. Only after we have personally experienced for ourselves that these things are true and good should we accept them.

How do we know something is really true and good? We regularly feel happy with it, without harming ourselves, or others, or the environment. In other words, we make others happy, too, with our understanding and actions. Something true and good does not depend on who speaks them, because truth and goodness are inherent in life itself.

Truth is what *frees* us from the narrowness of religion and priest-craft, but keeps us *rooted* in a crowded society flushed and flooded by easy pleasures and wild knowledge. Truth helps us to think clearly for ourselves so that we are not tricked into handing over our life's remote control to others.

Goodness frees our hearts so that we truly feel what is really beautiful in us and the world. However, the world is beautiful only when we are able to look deep into the stillness of our own hearts. For, the real world is not out there, but right here in our hearts. We create our own worlds. In this sense, we *are* the world. It is this world that is worth sharing with others, so that we become a universe of boundless happiness.

¹⁰⁷ S 56.31 = SD 21.7.

48 Please blow my balloon [R233]

One of the easiest ways to make a person happy is to nicely feed his pet delusions. If we can smilingly say “yes,” or “I agree,” or “you’re right,” we easily become popular. We can say the nicest things that others want to hear, or sensibly remaining silent on matters of sensitivity. People always love a good listener and the yes-man.

Now let’s reverse the roles. We are now the person who feels elated when others feed our delusions. They smilingly say “yes,” or “I agree,” or “you’re right.” We simply love such agreeable people. They say the nicest things that we want to hear. We always love a good listener.

Now there is a third person, the most important, someone we often forget, that is, we ourselves. Are we really aware that we feel elated, truly or falsely, when others feed our delusions? Do we realize that we are only happy when we think others approve of us? Do we know that our wellbeing is actually dependent on how others treat us? If so, then we need people to blow up our balloons: we are emotionally dependent.

People can say yes to us for many reasons, most of them unlikely to be what we make it out to be, or hope it to be – unless we can really read their minds. People might say the nicest things to us, again for all the wrong reasons. Perhaps, even those people do not really know the real reasons themselves. Maybe they are afraid to be wrong, or they are simply afraid of us.

There is nothing much we can really do to effectively change all those who have “wrong” opinions about us. Indeed, it is not even a worthwhile effort to try to do so, because people are like sea-waves that change with the tides and lunar cycles. Furthermore, how many people must we change before we think they think highly of us.

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We could try to change how others think of us, perhaps by sprucing up our looks, or dressing more smartly, or speaking in a more sophisticated tone, or impressing people with how much we know, and so on. This can really be tiresome after a while when we realize there are simply too many people to convert.

Or, worse, there are those who might actually know what we are trying to do, and perhaps just humour us. Then we realize, too late, that we are merely gesturing and dancing to their tunes. We are then mere hollow men, waiting to be filled by the fodder of others.

All these games people play with each other depend on the fact that we are looking outwards, and all we really see are surfaces and masks. We are a tribe of masked beings; we keep changing masks as we dance around the spaces and corners of our lives. That is why we enjoy going home or going for holidays. For then, we can really be ourselves – sometimes.

If we really want to enjoy our homes and holidays better, we need to turn the lights inwards more often. We need to see and understand who really are pulling our heart's strings, making us dance to tunes of emotional dependence. We are controlled by five back-seat drivers called EYE, EAR, NOSE, TONGUE and BODY. They are block capitalized because they are very powerful, the real masters of the unwary.

EYE tells us to measure others by how they appear to us. To look beautiful means, we think, to feel pleasurable. To be well-dressed means, we tell ourselves, to be of a high class, and as such worth our respect. Certain skin colours, we decide (probably unconsciously) have a higher value than others. So the EYE blinds us.

EAR tells us to grade others by sound and speech. Someone with a sweet or suave voice must surely be good. When a voice says things that we find agreeable, we at once think the person is right. When a

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person stutters or cannot speak well, we might discount him, or gratifyingly think we are better. So the EAR deafens us.

The real ruler of our lives is the MIND, that puts together the ideas and images that we paste onto the world we see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Few of us ever really poke a hole through this mental wallpaper to see what really lies beyond. In fact, most of us are fascinated with this sense-surround we have enveloped ourselves in.

Then one day, someone or something, pokes a hole through this balloon of ours. First, we might be shocked by the loss of something so familiar to us. Then, we might be angry that we had been deluded. Then, we try to find someone to blame, but this only burst more balloons.

The best person to blame is actually we ourselves, for it is easier for us to change and correct ourselves than to point fingers at others. Better still it is not to blame anyone. If there is anyone, or anything, to be blamed, it should be conditions. The more carefully we examine the conditions that have brought about the problem, the more likely we are to discover the solution and to know ourselves better.

If we care to regularly remind ourselves of the good that we are and the good that we have – our positive qualities, loved ones that we have, and the worthwhile things we are capable of – we have a better idea of what we should do next.

Once I saw a memorable 1962 Punch magazine cartoon. It shows an angel standing curiously high above a crowd of people. Someone in the crowd sees the angel, points him out, and everyone else looks up at the angel with interest. The angel, befuddled by the sudden attention, looks up to see what is attracting the crowd!¹⁰⁸ Please reflect on this beautiful parable.

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.punchcartoons.com/images/T/1962.03.21.454.jpg>.

49 The lone Buddhists [R234]

Today, as Buddhist “monastics” become more modernized and materialistic, more informed Buddhists are shying away from temples and “organized Buddhism” to practise by themselves. Many of them regularly express a sense of deep disillusionment at monks and nuns who do not take their monastic vows seriously.

The more informed Buddhists quietly attend meditation-based or sutta-centred sessions, or only go for Dharma activities and avoid any further involvement, for fear of “temple politics.” Here “temple politics” covers a wide range of worldly affairs, even scandals, where strife and disunity abound on account of such things as over-emphasis on fund-raising, personality cults around monastics and leaders, and a common tendency to measure others by wealth and status.

Far from the crowd of noisy Buddhism, such lone Buddhists quietly talk to their colleagues and co-workers about Dharma. Often they would give away some readable Dharma books, even to their seniors and bosses. The sense of Dharma commitment in such selfless and purposeful pratyeka or “lone” Buddhists is heart-warming.

Such accounts should inspire us not to be afraid to be lone Buddhists if necessary. Indeed, the Buddha Dharma began that way, with the lone radiant figure of the newly awakened Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree. In our moments of spiritual quest, we may often need to be alone, far from the madding crowd, like a lotus blossoming singly in the bright sunshine.

Let us be like bright sweet flowers, ever ready to freely share the Dharma nectar with the birds, bees and bugs that visit us for nourishment. And they carry off with them the fertile Dharma pollen to other flowers, so that our spiritual lives are enriched in joyful ways.

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There are also a growing number of pratyeka Buddhists all over the world, as Buddhism becomes better known and more easily available in far-flung "non-Buddhist" areas. Thanks to the internet and a more connected and educated world, we are able to access sutta texts and translations more easily for our personal study and meditation.

Being a Buddhist is not group membership, but *a state of mind*. It begins with an understanding and respect for our body and speech, so that we are healthily energized and calmly dignified. This is what the five precepts are about: *to love life, work hard to support ourselves, understand the true nature of love, be courageous in facing the truth, and keeping the mind calm and clear in preparation for mental cultivation.*

The suttas ("teaching threads") of the Buddha are full of instructions in personal development, mental cultivation (meditation), and self-healing. If we look carefully enough into the suttas, we will always find something to inspire us, and we need not even be religious about this. It is about self-understanding and other-acceptance in easy stages and doses. All this would inspire a natural happiness and goodness so that we fear no evil, we can work around any difficulty, and see peace in the moment.

It is easy to start a religious group or system or empire if we have management skills and money: we don't even need to know much about the religion. Without the Dharma, however, such structures are merely barren hills and mountains that can create and perpetuate dry burning deserts in our lives. From their clouded peaks, the mighty gurus lord over their followers below praying and playing in their sunken oases, careless of those stranded in the sands and darkness around them, and unaware of the approaching sandstorms and droughts.

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A Dharma-based network begins within our hearts, touched by the Buddha Dharma. Our hearts then beat in synchrony and rhythm so that we are naturally linked actively together with a higher purpose and inner vision. These are the qualities that make our outreach efforts meaningful and effective in nurturing a truly joyful and mature Buddhist community.

Buddhism is a state of mind. It starts off with a vision of self-understanding: our body is impermanent, changing and becoming otherwise. This wisdom behooves us to respect the body to keep it well for our own sake and for the sake of others. For, we are not alone, and our actions affect others and our environment.

This understanding then moves us to work our mind in ever good order: as we think, so we are. So we need to think well and wholesomely. Such wellness and wholesomeness begin and grow with our constant vision of the happy moments in our lives and those of others, a vision of growing joy. Buddhist work begins here, and becomes more and more embracing. The Buddha has given us the wisdom, now we must work our compassion to free our minds.

50 stop, thinking! Welcome, feeling! [R235]

Like other religions and systems, Buddhism often begins with words, but where the others refine the words, making them louder, more omnipresent, a true Buddhist gently moves ever more towards a spacious silence. Although words are the best we have for communicating with one another, it is not the best medium for the liberating truth that the Buddha has discovered and taught.

We have a way with words, and words have their way with us. The moment we put an idea into words, we limit it in a certain way. That is, unless we allow ourselves to hold on to those ideas only so long as they work, that is to say, they bring us a wholesome fullness and spacious joy.

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If we care for a moment to look deep into our hearts, we might notice that we are but a serial letter-go of ideas and opinions. We are not even able to remember, much less record, how many ideas have arisen in our minds, or how many opinions we have hatched in our lives, even opinions about our own selves. Yet we claim them to be “I,” “me,” “mine,” as if we are unchanging and unmoving entities.

The point is that ideas and opinions simply come and go, like our breath. We do not really have much control over them. In fact, in a sense, we have more control over our breath. We could hold our breath, if it helps, or slow it down to a gentle sweet flow. The true heroes of real life are those who are at peace with their breaths.

We can try to helpfully think about the breath. It is the most precious thing we have: it is our very life. No breath, no life. It is also a good indicator of our emotional state: the heavier we breathe, the faster we burn ourselves out, as it were. Notice how fast we breathe when we are angry or do something bad.

Feel how peaceful our breath is when we pray, especially without words, or when we meditate in stillness. We can then really *feel* our breath: we *are* our breath. To understand the breath is to understand life itself, to know ourselves. This is the Buddha’s open secret, but we need to be *open* to make it no more secret. It is our thinking that locks it away as a secret.

We *think* we *know*: two most potent ingredients for life imprisonment. While thinking limits ideas, turning them into perishable goods, knowing makes mummies of living truth and beauty. To *think* too much is to allow words to get in the way of our best interests. It is the dead weight that prevents our hot-air balloon from rising into the open heights. To *know* too much strips us naked of all veneer of comfortable tales and correct lies that fill and fuel our lives.

Yet thinking and knowing can serve us well if we really *feel*. For, to feel is to fully taste life’s offerings for ourselves. We need to truly

50 Stop, thinking! Welcome, feeling! [R235]

feel what pain is to value happiness. Yet true happiness is not merely the absence of pain, but an understanding that the two go together.

We need to truly know loss so that we value gain and love. Yet true happiness is not merely a catalogue of what we have and what we do, but the wisdom that gain and loss are inseparable.

We need to truly suffer blame to really enjoy praise. Yet true happiness is not a daily dose of dumb praises. For, a true appreciation of another must come as a surprise, not an expectation. It is like a cloudy day, when a bright ray of sun welcomingly breaks through. Yet true happiness embraces both praise and blame, from which we have a lot to benefit.

We need to walk humbly with obscurity before we realize that fame is a crowd that swallows us up, a sea of faces waving at us. Yet true happiness is unmoved by empty obscurity nor by crowded fame.

Happiness and sorrow, gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and no fame, love and hate – they are all voices in our heads. They are voices from our eyes, our ears, our noses, our tongues, our bodies, and most for all, our minds. Voices, voices everywhere, no sound maker is there! Keep it so, and we are safe.

Stop, thinking! Welcome, feeling! When we see someone, we are *that*; not the words we wrap him with. When we hear someone, we are *that*; not our inner chatter that jars him up. When we think of someone, we are *that*: smile, we are making it all up, a joke we play on ourselves.

See how the lotus rises from the mud that roots it. True strength rises out of the fire and ashes of pain and loss. See how the rain runs off a lotus leaf. And how the lotus blooms at the sun's first kiss.

Let us walk in love, kindness, gladness and inner calm: this way is safer.

51 Farewell, brother [R236]

My dear elder brother, Beng Tee (77) or Nya (local Baba for “big brother,” as my sister and I lovingly addressed him) passed away in Melaka, Malaysia, just after our Sutta Discovery class on 27 March 2012 (in the Buddhist Fellowship, Singapore). He started having dementia in 2009, which then worsened into schizophrenia. He was unable to recognize any of us most of the time. During his lucid moments, however, he had memory flashes of his childhood, but nothing after that.

One of my earliest memories of him, as related by our mother, was his involvement with almost any local religious festival. The most memorable was when he dressed up in one of the two huge effigies of the “Hantu Tetek” (*boothengkel* in local Tamil),¹⁰⁹ the highlight of the Ponggal or harvest festival and street procession unique to the Peranakan Hindus of our kampung, opposite our old family house in Melaka.

As a very active young man, he would climb coconut trees to pluck coconuts. One sad day, he fell from the tree-top.¹¹⁰ Fortunately, he clung on to a large coconut leaf, which broke his fall. He was hospitalized for five days.

He, along with my elder sister, Bulat (meaning “round (chubby),” from eating mostly rice and black sauce during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya), presented me, as a pre-school boy, with memorable picture-books, many pages of which are still vivid in my mind. This started off my love for books and reading. In an important way,

¹⁰⁹ See S S Dhoraisingham, [Pernakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka](#), Singapore: ISEAS, 2006:41 f.

¹¹⁰ See picture for the huge leaves and man atop a coconut tree, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coconut>

this was a foundation for my joy in doing full-time Tipitaka translation work today.

Nya had an old Remington portable typewriter which I would play with as a primary schoolboy. In fact, on account of it, I became quite an accomplished typist with four fingers. However, my curiosity got the better of me one day, and I decided to dismantle the typewriter to repair it. Then I realized I could not put it back together again. When he found out about it, I recall, he just smiled and got a new model!

As a teenage schoolboy, Nya and our youngest uncle could not get along at all. As a result, my parents agreed to send him to live with our eldest uncle, Tan Gim Ann, in his Limbongan house. My parents probably did not know what he was heading for, as our aunt (Mrs Tan Gim Ann) was a devout Christian (who after our uncle's death turned her house into a Gospel chapel).

Much as he resisted being converted, he was basically entrapped. His colleagues would regularly tease him as an "unbeliever" (*bo xiang xin* in local Hokkien), to the extent it affected his studies. In due course, he converted, and indoctrination and training did the rest. After a few decades, he even became one of the church elders.

In the early days, when the church was still located diagonally opposite our Melaka house, some of his Christian friends would come over to our house to try to convert my sister (I was 13 years younger than her). She was so terrified, she tells me, that she had to hide in the toilet until they were gone. In 1965, the church split, and his group moved to the Limbongan chapel.

Our parents, on account of the sad loss of their eldest son to Christianity, advised me that I should be a Buddhist, so that there was someone to pray for them in the proper family way when they passed on. This led me to regularly attend the local Seck Kia Eenh (Ma-

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lacca Buddhist Association) on the next street. But that is another story.

However, I loved and admired him enough, so that during my adolescence, out of my religious curiosity, I agreed to his suggestion to sign up for a correspondence course with the Emmaus Bible School (Australia). I duly completed two courses, one in the New Testament and the other, the Old Testament, and received two certificates for them.

Then came the religious trauma. When I completed the course, in the Q&A section, I asked my tutor the fatal question: What would happen to my many non-Christian friends (including my parents, my sister, and my relatives)? Answer: Since they were unbelievers, they would all go to hell! I remember a powerful shock overcame me: despite all the biblical claim of Godly love for man, this is not unconditional love at all.

I told my brother about this, and I recall his troubled silence. I could even detect a sadness in him, not that I would never convert now, but at my tutor's unloving remark. In fact, since then, we never mentioned the course again. When, in 1970, I decided to become a Buddhist monk, he was not surprised at all. In fact, he was almost proud of it, as he would often tell his non-Christian friends (which he had many) about me.

Once, he confided in me that as brothers, we should never be stumbling-blocks to one another. He was quoting the Bible: looking back at what he told me showed that he was more tolerant than most Christians. In fact, after he had attended the landmark Conference on Evangelism for Malaysia and Singapore (COEMAS) (April 1978)¹¹¹ in Singapore, he handed over the whole thick file to me. Again his

¹¹¹ For its significance, see <http://efosingapore.org/aboutus/>.

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silence was very telling: he surely had disapproved of such high-handed evangelism.

The file contained various ambitious Christian plans to evangelize all the local religions (Muslims, Hindus, Daoists, Confucianists, Sikhs, and Buddhists), and specific groups within each religion, such as Mahayana Buddhists, Theravada Buddhists, English-speaking Buddhists, and Chinese-speaking Buddhists, and exposing local Buddhist teachings that contradict the Buddha's teachings, etc. Cold chills ran down my spine as I studied the file. I decided to hold national seminars for young Buddhists in Malaysia and Singapore to discuss the sections related to Buddhists. My commitment to Buddhism was more purposeful than ever before, thanks to Nya.

In fact, I learned to trust him enough to sometimes discuss with him some of my own spiritual struggles, especially as a Buddhist worker who wanted local Buddhists to be more grounded in our own early scriptures. Many of the Buddhist leaders, especially the Sinhalese Buddhist missionaries in Malaysia, saw this as a threat to their local influence and source of income. The local Buddhists, furthermore, feared the foreign robes enough not to work with a lay Dharma teacher who had come from a poor local family, one much poorer than a temple priest.

One day, I confided in him: Why is it so difficult for locals to teach locals the Buddhism of the Buddha? His reply: You are a "prophet," and a prophet is not without honour, except in his own country. He gave me another useful advice: since I had difficulty working with the temple Sadducees and Pharisees (the Buddhist "elite"), I should instead register a trust or a company to work independently.

Another warm memory I have of my brother was when I had to leave a local temple after being blackballed for my "critical Buddh-

ism and Dharma over-enthusiasm,¹¹² and I had to remove my huge library of Buddhist scriptures, books and materials. He personally volunteered and drove the Gospel Chapel van right into the temple to help me move them!

Now I can say that whenever I think of the Minding Centre, I also recall my brother, Beng Tee, whom I know loved me for what I am. No greater love has a brother than this.

52 Now is the moment [R237]

[For fullest benefit, record this and listen to it as a meditation.]

Here is a beautiful way of really living life right now. You need nothing at all except simply sit quietly by yourself wherever you are or wherever you like. Let us use the word “now” for our focus.

First, carefully lift the now out from this screen or page. You do this by attentively letting your eye flow through the surface of these words into what lies behind them. Or fully listen to this recording, and follow the now.

Next, place the now between your palms gently, and feel how your finger-tips touch each other, and the precious warmth within your palms.

Don't be afraid of the now. It has nothing to do with religion. It is about us here and now. This is best done with eyes closed, so that you can see what eyes hide.

Now try to feel the now: is it heavy or light? Hard or soft? Rough or smooth?

¹¹² Meaning my social criticisms on how Buddhism can serve society better, and that Buddhists should know their Tipitaka better than merely highlighting rituals and social events.

52 Now is the moment [R237]

Open your palms: does the now float up or away? No need for answers: just ask. The answer will come in their time.

Breathe in the now: feel the peace. Smile at the thought-free spaces.

Breathe out the now: feel the stress and darkness dispersing. Smile at the light feeling.

Do it once again: breathe in...peaceful...breathe out...free.

Put the now at your tongue-tip: how does it taste? A wet cool taste, perhaps. It doesn't matter: it tastes just the way you want it.

Next carefully listen to the now for any sound. So many sounds around us, but in between, such deep silence. Flow with the silence for as long as you like.

Now try whispering the now to yourself. It is pronounced as P-E-A-C-E. Gently smile at it to keep it still. P-E-A-C-E.

Now whisper it to the kindest person you know, someone who accepts you unconditionally, just as you are. Picture this person if you like, and whisper: P-E-A-C-E.

Sit with the now. Feel how still, safe and light your body feels.

Stand with the now, like a mountain, unshaken by the winds. Notice how your weight presses down on the ground. How the earth supports you without ever complaining.

Lie down with the now, if you like; and feel how restful you are. Nothing to do but peacefully rest, restfully peaceful.

Walk with the now: notice how meaningful each step becomes, walking towards peace with every step.

Run with the now if you like, and feel the wind in your face, brushing your arms. Smile at your feet touching the earth as you go.

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Swim and stretch the now. Feel the now rhythm in your movements. Notice how your heart beats now.

Sweat with the now: notice how watery you are; you are mostly water. Water in your body; the water all around you: they are the same water. They are flowing, changing. We are part of a water cycle.

Feel the heat in your body: that's the now fire. Even as we breathe, the air fires up our body. We are that fire, body heat: it is another name for impermanence and decay. We start to decay from the moment we are born.

We burn with the fire of greed, the fire of hate, the fire of delusion. We are all burning: our eye is burning, our ear is burning, our nose is burning, our tongue is burning, our body is burning, our mind is burning. Burning with greed, with hate, with delusion. But not right now: you are at peace. The fire is out for the moment. Enjoy it.

Breathe in mindfully: the air is full of now. Feel the wind in your belly, then your chest. Hold it for now. Then give the wind back to nature, plus all your tiredness, your pains, your tears, your fears, your desires, your sadness, your ignorance: the now will cleanse and heal you.

The now is always there with you, even in the toilet. Empty yourself of all waste and wash yourself. Cleanse and refresh yourself with the now. Don't forget to flush away all your unwanted waste of greed, hate, delusion and fear.

Now for a healthy meal. Thank all the people who brought us the food. There are so many: the cooks, the vendors, the servers, the cleaners. Thank the trees, the plants, the earth, the weather and the sun, too, for making this food healthy and possible.

Chew every morsel till it is one with our sweet saliva. Every mouthful, every mindful sip. Smile at it, it's becoming you. This is how we

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take food with the now: it is the richest spice, the best food supplement. This is how we breathe life now into every cell in our body.

As you rest, visualize the now as a beautiful white lotus, in the centre of your heart, shining radiant like the sun or the full moon. The now is radiant with lovingkindness: it lights up your body and mind, cleansing it, purifying it, healing it.

Now shine the light of lovingkindness to everyone nearby, the whole building, the neighbourhood, the whole country, the world, the universe; then to your loved ones, your pets, your plants, and finally back to yourself.

The now is a bright light, always there in our hearts, wherever we are. Just before sleeping, look into this now light. As soon as you wake up, smile at this now light. When you wake up in the middle of the night, look into this bright now light. No matter what happens, always look into this now light inside us. We will find our way around in the darkest of places or times. We *are* peace now.

53 Vesak Baby [R238]

A popular public ritual during Vesak Day is the “lustration of the child Siddhartha,” sometimes called the bathing of the Buddha, which is not historically correct, as he is still the Bodhisattva then. The ritual is mainly based on such texts as the Acchariya Abbhūta Sutta (M 123) and the Commentaries, especially the Introduction of the Jātaka Commentary (J 53).

The Acchariya Abbhūta Sutta (M 123) says that the child Siddhartha is born totally pure, like a gem on a piece of exquisite Kaṣī cloth: neither he soils the cloth, nor the cloth soils him. Then, it is said:

“When the Bodhisattva came forth from his mother’s womb, two jets of water, one cool and one warm, seemed

to issue forth from the skies, washing the Bodhisattva and his mother.” (M 123.19/3:123).

It is in this connection that we today mindfully “bathe” the child Bodhisattva Siddhartha, that is, recollecting the most fortunate appearance of the Buddha-to-be in our world for the benefit of all beings. There are other legends that say that he is able to walk and talk as soon as he is born, and when he walks, his feet do not touch the ground, but are supported by seven lotuses.

This is the ancient Indian way of saying that this is no ordinary child. He is born into the world, but is untouched by the world, like a lotus, although rooted in the mud, blooms beautifully in the bright sun. This also reminds us that, despite our defilements of greed, hate and delusion, we can rise free from them by practising the Buddha’s teachings of inner peace.

The baby Bodhisattva or child Siddhartha reminds us that we are still a baby or at least a child in our spiritual development. We still need a role model, that is, the Buddha. We need a method of personal development and mental cultivation, that is, the Dharma. But we must never despair as there are many others who have gone ahead of us: they are the true individuals of the holy Sangha, the great awakened saints.

May I study, practise and realize the true Dharma. May I not be distracted from the path of the true light by its colourful reflections, so enticing yet hollow and misleading. May I keep on moving, even if slowly or even if I have stopped for a moment.

May I have the energies of the Bodhisattva to never lag in my striving for spiritual awakening. May I have the wisdom of the Buddha to see things as they truly are, and his compassion to show others the right way, too.

When I am alone in my struggle for good and happiness, without my loved ones, my friends, or those I respect, may I recall the lone light of the awakened Buddha under the Bodhi tree. He sits alone in joy and light, and soon the bright dawn warms upon him. He never gives up.

As time flies by, may I put my best into life, and give my best to those around me, that the world may be a better place. When it is my turn to return to a new life, may I see with joy a new and better world, ever closer to the Buddha.

Bathing the baby Bodhisattva

Traditionally, we mindfully pour three ladles full of water over the image of the child Bodhisattva. As we pour the first ladleful, we should reflect:

“May my bodily actions be free from greed and other unwholesome roots.”

As we pour the second ladleful, we should reflect:

“May my speech and communication be free from hate and other unwholesome roots.”

As we pour the third ladleful, we should reflect:

“May my thoughts be calm and clear, free from delusion and other unwholesome roots.”

The three bows of joy

As we bow before the child Bodhisattva image or the Buddha image, let us exult in the three wonderful joys:

With the first bow, rejoice thus:

“The Buddha has arisen in this world and we still remember him as the world teacher. I aspire to be like the Buddha in his wisdom and compassion.

With the second bow, rejoice thus:

“The Buddha Dharma is still with us, and lives in us as long as we practise it. I aspire to taste the peace of its beauty and the clarity of its truth, and to share it with others. As I learn I will teach; as I teach I will learn.”

With the third bow, rejoice thus:

“The Noble Sangha of Saints is my true refuge. The acts and awakening of the great saints – monks, nuns, laymen and lay women—inspire me to seek liberation in this life itself, at least as a streamwinner. For those who aspire to become Buddhas, I rejoice in their courage and sacrifice.”

54 Like God [R239]

Man can never know God. If we have really known God, there would be no need for religion, which some defined as “different ways of seeing God.” The problem is there are so many different ways, but no one seems to be really making the journey.

We tend to think of God as a ready-made being or some fixed eternal state. Nothing eternal can really exist. It is at best something imagined, something we try to talk about in a self-convincing way. That is why the different religions often quarrel and hurt one another. Even within the same religion, different groups and persons often argue and hurt one another. One encyclopaedia of religion quips that they all swear by the same God, and swear at each other by the same one, too!

Some try to claim *my* God is the true one, all else false. But many different people make this same claim. What about plurality? Maybe everyone is right. But once we put something in the plural, it means that there are many different things; so we keep contradict-

ing ourselves! Some try to say, all Gods are the same; there is only one true God. This might work as long we question no further.

God, apparently, does not speak for himself. Different groups or persons can only claim that someone they knew had met God personally. Is only *one* person right; or, could *everyone* be right? The problem remains: we are only acting on hearsay down through the ages.

Maybe there is a way out: let us not ask any questions at all, but simply believe. *Believe that we might understand*, an ancient thinker advised.¹¹³ Leave the difficult details to the religious specialists. This approach seems to work as long as we do not question the preachers or as long as we have unquestioning faith. Or, our faith is really in other things.

In fact, most people seem comfortable with this last approach: we don't need to think about it. It simplifies our lives and we are accepted as part of a group or tribe. To feel accepted by others is very empowering, so that the sociologist Emile Durkheim famously proclaimed in 1912 that "God is society, writ large." Interesting or useful as this idea is, it remains at best a sociologist's God.

Then there is the notion of "the" God, the one that everyone *must* believe in: this is the God of the powerful. One vital and interesting thread of religious history is man's struggle to free himself from the God of the powerful. Or, some might say, to free God from the powerful, so that we can see him and worship him, each in our own way. Here, the French Revolution (1789-1799) is one of the key events in the progressive liberation of the human spirit.

Despite (or because of) great human and religious progress, the "God" problem is still with us. People keep on committing tragic and widespread atrocities, killing and maiming those they hate, mostly

¹¹³ Compare "May I understand so that I may believe." In Buddhism, this is called wise faith. Its opposite is called "unrooted" or foolish faith.

the innocent. With modern technology and communication, we are getting better at destroying ourselves—and we also drag God into our mutual destruction.

Isn't it best to rightfully and respectfully leave God in his heaven? From the misuse and abuse of God in man's hands, we must agree that such men's wisdom is only foolishness in the eyes of their victims and sensible people.

The point is that we can never *own* God. No religion has a sole copyright to God. No group, no matter how powerful, must own God. If we cannot own God, then we must also not speak for him. Perhaps, we might venture, God might speak for himself. How is this possible?

The Buddha has examined this issue over 2500 years ago, and his simple answer is: look within ourselves. Of course, he explains in great detail about this important issue. God is not a person nor an idea to believe in. We could, for convenience, say that God is "spirit" in the sense that he is Love, in every wholesome sense of the word.

More exactly, the Buddha teaches that God, as a start, is "unconditional love." The supreme worship begins, at least in our moments of silent prayer, with our accepting others as we accept ourselves. "Unconditional" means that we must show an all-embracing acceptance of not just humans, but also animals, plants, the environment, our planet, the whole cosmos itself. This is the first step to live in Godliness: we need to love others as we love ourselves.

When others (meaning people, animals, plants, nature, etc) are in any kind of trouble, we need to respond in a compassionate way. Compassion means kindness shown to others *even when they do not deserve it*. When we understand that all life are interconnected, and what we do somehow affects others in some way, then this

notion of compassion makes great sense. We need to be kind to others *unconditionally*.

After all, in the eyes of others, we are the “others.” Compassion is not limited to only club members: it is an appreciation of being, rejoicing in all beings that we are all capable of goodness. See how happily children often play with one another, enjoying the goodness in each other. There is that child of goodness in every one of us.

If we just allow it, others will be able to show their good side, so to speak. Often enough, people seem to enjoy showing their happiness in their work, or relationship, or a windfall. Let the joy of others kindle joy in us, too. Let us then show that we are happy with them, too. This is the third step in a Godly life: rejoice heartily in the goodness of others.

Yes, you are right if you think all this sounds idealistic (only happening in our minds). That’s just the point: Godliness begins in the mind, or better, in the heart. As we think, so we are; as we feel, so we act. If after following these three steps, we still feel that there is a need for more Godliness and goodness, it means that we are really looking around with loving care.

We may not be able to change the world, but we can begin with love, compassion, and gladness from right where we are now. This is the fourth step in a Godly life: no matter how much good we have done, there remains much more to do. Yet we must rest so that we are better prepared for the next step.

God is spirit, from the Latin “spiritus,” which means “breath.” We can and must breathe in and out by ourselves. No can do this for us. If we try to get others to breathe for us, we will truly suffocate. Only when we have learned to truly breathe well that we will really see God. Every breath we take is a living reminder that we must do this ourselves. Breathe joyfully in peace.

55 Mother tree [R240]

Mother's Day—with the apostrophe S—celebrates the mother in our home. She is not only the womb of the family, but its heart and hands. In early Buddhism, mother's love is celebrated in the Metta Sutta (the Discourse on Lovingkindness) as the epitome of unconditional love. We should love all beings just as a mother loves her one and only child. Indeed, a truly loving mother loves every one of her children as if each were her only one.

The most nourishing quality of a loving mother is her presence. We not only feel safe and good, like being in the shade of a cool tree, but we also feel that we are the most important person in the world in her presence. A child who receives such an unconditional love grows up to be a wholesome loving person with a healthy social effect on others. Such a love accepts us just as we are, so that we are capable of bringing forth the best of our potentials, especially becoming a true individual.

Our mother is the tree from which we flower into fruits. And as seeds, we must fall as far away from the tree as possible so that we are really free to be ourselves. If we remain within her shadow, then we would never grow. A wise loving mother prepares her child to be free of her in due course, just as her mother has done before her. A true mother's love is the solid ground on which a good and sure person stands and grows to live and love in her own time.

A vital part of Mother's Day should be that of reflecting that not everyone has the good fortune of the love of a happy mother. Many of us have been hurt or are being abused by our mothers. The bitter fruits of this are very clear: we find it difficult to love anyone, mainly because we have not been shown how. Since we know only hurt, we keep hurting others, especially those who truly love us.

55 Mother tree [R240]

So we are nothing but a mother's dark shadow. This is the worst that a mother can do for her child. In an important way, such a person has abandoned herself as a fount of love, and hence is only mother in body (biologically) but not at heart. This terribly upsets the natural order of things, as it is difficult for her child to show gratitude to her, since what defines a mother—unconditional love—is not there.

Yet a child must grow, even on her own, albeit painfully, slowly. If such a child has the courage and wisdom to fly from the dark shadows of unlove, she would surely rise from the mud of her sufferings to be a beautiful lotus in the bright sun, whose leaves no pain could stick to.

On the other hand, if the child is seen only as a mother's investment, then the child must patiently wait for the healing hands of change to mellow the mother in some way. Thankfully time takes away everything, mothers and all. Then we are free to look back with insight that our pains have wised us up: such a mother is a victim of her own circumstances. She was herself never loved, only a link in a painful legacy of unlove.

It is then time to forgive with compassion, to be kind to those even when they do not deserve it. In forgiving, we break the painful samsaric chains, so that we are truly free of the dark past, and look ahead to bright days of loving and being loved, and teaching others to love.

Motherhood, on the other hand, is not merely a gender role. A few of us, for various reasons, only have a father, some even from very young. Our father then must fulfill the twin roles of mothering and fathering. This is easier to imagine and act on if we see them as loving with the heart and the head, or with compassion and wisdom.

The heart aspect of mothering is that of *humanizing* a child. A child is only born with a human body, but not always a human heart.

SIMPLE JOYS 3: Loving words

During the first seven years, mothering humanizes a child, and loving the child makes her a loving human.¹¹⁴ Male mothering, if gently and properly done, has just the same effect. To feel loved empowers us to love.

If all this fails, Buddhism gives us a second chance, that is, learning to love ourselves. To truly love ourselves, we need to rise above the self, as it were. We must see ourselves as we see those whom we like or love. We need to constantly hold an ideal or mental image of someone truly loving, in the spiritual sense.

In **the Sacca Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 141), the Buddha declares:

Emulate Sāriputta and Moggallāna, bhikshus! Associate with Sāriputta and Moggallāna, bhikshus! They are wise and helpful to their companions in the holy life. Sāriputta is like a child-giver [mother]; Moggallāna is like the child's nurse. Sāriputta trains others for the fruit of streamwinning [initial sainthood], and Moggallāna for the supreme goal.

(M 141,5), SD 11.11

First, we immerse ourselves in that total love: we accept ourselves unconditionally (“I accept myself just as I am.”) Then we direct that same unconditional love to others who are important to us, including animals. Visualize a beautiful white lotus in our hearts radiating with lovingkindness all the time.

Mentally radiate this light of lovingkindness to everyone around us, and to anyone we feel a need to direct it to, no matter how far away. If we feel strong enough, then we could also direct it to those who have hurt us. Before falling asleep, visualize that bright lotus gently radiant: sleep happily.

¹¹⁴ See “We are not born human” (R216): no 31 above. On the humanization process, see **Love**, SD 38.4 (4.4).

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